

Upside Down All Over Again by DefinitelyYou

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Summary:

Nancy and Jonathan have been together nearly a month, and the rumors that have plagued them since that fateful week last November have only gotten worse. Nancy has finally given up caring, but between the Hawkins rumor mill, personal biases, and the ever-present reality of the Upside Down, she and Jonathan are in for a bumpy ride.

1. What Goes Around

Slut.

That's what greets Nancy this morning, written in red marker across the top of her locker, just above her head so everyone can see whether she's there or not. It's not the first time she's been greeted by this or other disparaging words at her locker—slut, perv, cheater, just to name a few. All very unoriginal. All very immature. All very hurtful.

At least they are to Jonathan.

She and Jonathan have been together for nearly a month, and the rumors that have plagued them since last November—that Nancy “The Slut” Wheeler left the popular jock Steve Harrington for Jonathan “The Perv” Byers—have only gotten worse. Even though they've been discrete about their relationship for their sake and for Steve's, they've still managed to draw attention to themselves. Once word got out that she and Steve broke up, the rumors began in earnest, more than likely spread by Tommy and Carol and their crew. Steve tries—he makes an effort to talk to them both and even eats with them from time to time. It's helped stopped most of the rumors, but the graffiti continues.

She's finally given up caring—it's all such bullshit. The only people that matter in her life are her family and Jonathan. Why should she care what others think? After everything that's happened to her in the past year, she knows there's far more to life than high school rumors and innuendo, and she refuses to take the time to worry about the Hawkins High School rumor mill. But Jonathan sees things differently. He hates the attention that it brings to them. He says that he doesn't want her to have to deal with this on top of everything else she's been through, but she knows that the graffiti and whispers in the hall only reinforce his own insecurities—that he's not good enough for her, that she deserves someone better. He won't admit that, of course, but she knows him too well.

She doesn't even try to remove the slur from her locker. What's the use, she thinks as she turns around to see Jonathan standing across

the hall, a look of anger flashing across his face before he catches her eye. Ignoring everyone else, Nancy walks across the crowded hall and reaches for his hand, which he pulls away. She knows that this won't be an easy day for them.

"Hey, good morning, stranger," she says mockingly as she looks up at him. He left her side barely two hours ago, having fallen asleep while studying the night before and slipping out of her room at dawn, and she's hoping she can get him to at least offer a small smile at her bad attempt at a joke.

"Yeah, a good morning, huh," he says, looking back to her locker.

"Jonathan, I don't care about that. I don't," she says again as he starts to cut her off. "And it has been a good morning so far—in all the ways that count," she says, remembering the time they spent in each other's arms before he left her this morning. "And that word on my locker isn't one of them."

"But this is ridiculous, Nancy. You may as well sew a giant 'A' to your shirt like Hester Prynne," he scoffs.

"How about I make us matching sweaters—mine will have a giant S for slut and yours can have a giant P for perv. Then people won't need to start rumors—we'll own the narrative."

"Ha, ha," he says.

"Hey, you're the one who brought up *The Scarlet Letter*, not me."

Jonathan rubs his hands through his shaggy hair, takes a deep breath, and finally gives her the smile she's been looking for. "OK, truce," he laughs. "If it doesn't bother you, it won't bother me. But this is seriously hurting my attempt at being the chivalrous boyfriend. The least I could do is wash it off of your locker."

"You know better than anyone that I don't need rescuing, Jonathan Byers," she says as she grabs his hand and pulls him across the hall back to the offending locker. "Now, stay with me as I get my books and then walk me to class. I think that will win you some points on the chivalry scale."

She barely sees Jonathan the rest of the day, as her Thursday schedule is completely at odds with his. They only share AP English together during last hour, and he came to class late, going straight to his back corner seat. His only acknowledgement of her was his hand grazing across her desk as he walked past.

She attempts to capture his attention a few times during class, but he won't look up at her. She becomes more frustrated with him as the minutes tick by. Her concentration is so far gone that she doesn't even hear the teacher, Mrs. White, ask her to read aloud from their poetry textbook.

"Nancy, are you with us today?" Mrs. White asks her after a second attempt to capture her attention.

"Oh, yes, yes, I am. I'm sorry. What do you need again?" Nancy responds sheepishly.

When the bell rings, Jonathan is the first to leave the classroom, not even acknowledging her on his way out. Dammit, there's that wall again, she thinks to herself as she gathers her things. Despite their developing relationship, he still manages to keep her at arm's length when he wants to. She knows it's one of the reasons he likes photography so much—it's not just that he can see people for who they truly are, but they can't see him in return. It's easier for him to hide behind a camera, to make himself invisible, than to draw attention to himself. She also knows it's how he's survived his entire life—his parent's marriage and break-up, his need to focus on home instead of his social life, his mistrust of most everyone, and his brother's mysterious ordeal last year. But she won't let him disappear, not after everything they've been through together.

She hurries out of the classroom and into the hall, trying to catch a glimpse of him among the myriad students wandering back to their lockers at the end of the day. She doesn't see him and decides to head to the darkroom. After knocking lightly on the door, she's greeted by their classmate Jody.

"Looking for Jonathan," Jody asks.

“Yeah, have you seen him?”

“Not here. He passed me in the hall a few minutes ago,” she responds. “It’s odd—he was supposed to help me develop a few photos today, but he didn’t say a thing as he walked past. It’s not like him.”

“No, it’s not,” Nancy says. “If he comes back, will you let him know I’m looking for him?”

“Sure thing,” Jody says, closing the door.

Confused, Nancy stops by her locker, grabs her coat and homework for the night, and heads out to the parking lot, hoping to find his car. She doesn’t, discovering an empty parking spot instead.

“Dammit, Jonathan,” she says to herself. She knows he doesn’t have to work tonight and that Will rode his bike to school this morning (or at least Mike said he was leaving early to meet Will in the AV room), so Jonathan didn’t need to pick him up. She won’t go home without talking to him, so she decides she has one option. “Looks like a nice afternoon for a walk,” she mutters under her breath

“Hey Nancy,” Will Byers says cheerfully as he greets her at their front door.

“Hey, Will,” she responds not quite as cheerfully. “Jonathan isn’t here, huh.”

“No, I figured he was with you,” he says.

“Nope, not with me,” she says. “Do you mind if I wait here for him? I really wanted to talk to him after school.”

“Sure. I was going to play some Pitfall on the Atari before starting homework. Wanna play with me?”

“You bet,” she says as she walks into their living room, setting her bags by the front door. “Mike never lets me play Atari with him. He knows I’ll kick his ass,” she says winking at Will.

Will sits down in front of the TV set, laughing at her response. “I don’t care if you beat me,” he says, “I just like playing against someone other than the computer.”

“Scoot over,” she says settling herself on the floor next to him, “and be prepared for an ass whooping.”

She and Will play for about a half-hour—she is, as promised, kicking his ass—before Jonathan walks through the front door, head down as he shrugs his bag off of his shoulder.

“Hey, Will, sorry I’m late. I . . .” Jonathan trails off once he sees Nancy on the floor with his brother.

“Hi,” Nancy says getting up off the floor. “You sure left school in a hurry . . .” stopping mid-sentence as she notices him sporting what will soon be a serious black eye.

“Jonathan, what happened?” she asks as she rushes to his side.

He ducks his head just before she can reach out to him, “Nothing. It’s fine”

“Bullshit,” she says back. “What happened?” she asks again, this time more forcefully.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he responds back just as forcefully.

They stare at each other, mirror images of stubbornness, for at least a minute before Will finally interrupts them.

“Want me to get you some ice,” Will asks shyly.

Jonathan softens as he turns to his brother. “Sure, Will, that’d be great.”

Nancy takes advantage of this vulnerable moment and reaches up to brush Jonathan’s bangs away from his eye, inspecting it more closely. It’s already starting to turn a sick shade of purple, and his eyelid is swelling shut. She catches his good eye, and her anger dissolves. She leans up, instead, and gently places a kiss on the damaged one, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Talk to me,” she whispers in his

ear.

He wraps his arms around her, pulling her close and placing a gentle kiss on her neck. They stay locked together until they hear Will clear his throat. "Here you go, Jonathan."

"Thanks, buddy," Jonathan says, ruffling Will's hair and placing the icepack on his bad eye. Nancy takes his hand and leads him back to his room.

She deposits Jonathan on his bed after shutting the door and sits facing him. She takes his left hand in hers, tracing the scar that matches her own—a badge of their monster hunting last fall—with her fingers. "What happened, Jonathan? Please tell me," she says.

"You should see the other guy," he says, with a slight smile.

"Oh god, Jonathan, I'm serious," she responds. "Did this have to do with what happened this morning?"

Instead of answering, he pulls her onto his lap. Dropping the icepack, he takes her face in his hands and kisses her gently, almost chastely. As frustrated as she is with him, she responds to his touch immediately, opening her mouth to deepen the kiss. She knows that this is his way of apologizing to her, for shutting her out. And as much as she wants a direct answer, she knows that she can't force it out of him. So she waits. And when she wraps her arms around him and places her head on his shoulder, she feels him release the breath she knows he's been holding since he walked in the door. And he finally begins to talk.

"I know the rumors, the graffiti on our lockers, doesn't bother you like it does me, and I've been trying to ignore it Nance, I really have," he starts. "But today was just too much. After I walked you to class, I saw Tommy H in the hall. I did my best to ignore him, but he made it impossible. He started calling out to me, asking me if I'd seen your locker and if I had any idea who would do such a thing. . . and then he asked how it felt to have Steve's sloppy seconds."

Nancy immediately looks up after his last comment, seeing the anger she feels reflected in his eyes (at least his good eye).

“What did you do?” she asks.

“I turned and punched him in the face.”

“Jonathan, you didn’t,” she groans. “We only have two weeks left of school this year, and then they are gone, out of our lives. You couldn’t have just kept walking?”

“Nancy, would you have kept walking if you heard someone say something that terrible about me?” he asks.

She knows her answer but hates to admit it to him, so she settles on shaking her head instead.

“So what happened? He couldn’t have punched you back—you didn’t have this when I saw you in English class,” she says gently caressing his bad eye.

“Well, I caught him by surprise for sure,” he says with a smirk.

“Don’t be too proud of yourself, Jonathan Byers.”

“I’m not, it was just a pretty great moment, seeing the look on his face,” he says smiling to himself. “Anyway, the hallway cleared, and I expected him to get back up, but he just sat there staring at me. Mr. Baumer came out of his classroom then and broke up the scene.”

“No one said anything? Baumer didn’t even talk to you?”

He shakes his head.

“And why didn’t I hear about this? As fast as rumors fly around here, why did no one say anything to me?” she adds quickly.

“No idea. I honestly thought you were mad at me because of it—I didn’t see you all day, and I figured it was because you heard about the fight,” he says, shrugging, “Maybe everyone else is as sick of them as we are.”

“Ok, so the eye?” Nancy asks, returning to the subject at hand.

“Oh yeah, so, um, right before 6th hour, Tommy met me at my locker

(sporting a nice bruise on his right cheek), and declared in front of everyone that we were taking the fight to the alley behind the Hawkins Theatre, right after school. ‘Be there or not. Either way your ass is mine,’ he said.”

“God, he didn’t really say that, did he?” she asks.

“Those exact words,” Jonathan responds.

“And that was right before English, huh? And that’s why you wouldn’t look at me—you decided to go?”

“Well, I thought you were mad, and, yeah, I had decided to go,” he fidgets nervously as he goes on. “I knew that if I talked to you, I’d probably would have changed my mind.”

“And what would have been wrong with that?” she asks climbing off of his lap.

He scoots himself up the top of his bed, leaning on his wall and sighs.

“See, this is where you and I disagree,” he finally says.

“We sure do,” Nancy responds tersely.

“Nance, I couldn’t just leave it. Not after what he said and what I did. And I’m sick of being the target of his insults. I don’t care what people think of me, but you . . . you deserve better than that,” he says finally looking up at her.

Nancy takes him in for a minute, his black eye and shaggy hair. He looks so vulnerable—you’d never guess that he knocked a classmate down with a single punch. How can this compassionate, patient, kind person turn around a punch someone so easily? She knows Jonathan’s taste in music, his talent for photography, his love for his mother and brother, his distrust of his father. She knows how to make him smile, how to make him sigh her name, how to convince him to fight a monster from another dimension. But she doesn’t always know what will bring his anger or passion bubbling to the surface. He’s still an enigma to her in so many ways, and that thought alone excites her, makes her breath quicken, her stomach flip, and her palms sweat.

And that's when she realizes just how far gone she is for Jonathan Byers.

"I love you," she says softly.

"What?"

"I love you, Jonathan," she says again.

"Where did that come from?"

"I don't know. I'm sitting here, looking at you, furious that you put yourself in harm's way for me, felt you had to defend me in some way, and yet I've already forgiven you, and I don't even know what happened this afternoon."

"You're not making any sense," he says confused.

"Neither are you, but I don't care. I don't care what Tommy and Carol say about us or what's scrawled on my locker. I don't care that you drive a beat up old car or who your parents are or that a monster crawled through your ceiling. None of it makes a difference to me. All I care about is you," she says definitively.

Jonathan stares at her for a beat or two, an odd look on his face. She can't tell if he thinks she's lost her mind or if she's the most amazing thing he's ever seen. And then he moves towards her quickly, taking her completely by surprise. He wraps her in his arms and kisses her with a passion she's never experienced before. Steve was never this eager or hungry for her. She wants to drown in it, give over all control to it, just to see what more lies beneath the surface.

Her hands eagerly explore his body, raking up his shirt so that she can feel his skin, his stomach contracting at her touch. He returns the favor, yanking off her shirt so quickly she thinks she heard it rip. Jonathan places kisses across her chest and stops to revere each of her breasts, causing her to mewl and moan his name in response. She doesn't care that Will is in the next room, all she cares about is him, feeling his skin on hers, wanting to make him moan in turn. She hears him whispering something as he continues his trail of kisses down her torso, and she listens closely. He's chanting, "I love you, I

love you, I love you.”

She sits up suddenly, pulling him with her and flipping him over onto his back. Straddling him, she rocks back and forth ever so slowly, watching as his eyes roll back into his head as his hands tighten at her waist. She both loves the power she holds over him and is desperate for him to understand just how much he means to her. She takes his hands and places them above his head, holding them in place with her own and settling herself more fully on top of him. His hardness hits her in all of the right places, and it's all she can do to keep herself from dissolving into a babbling mess

“Look at me, Jonathan,” she whispers as she rolls her hips ever so slightly.

He moans her name in response but doesn't open his eyes.

“I said look at me,” she says, rolling them again more aggressively. This time she can't control her own moan from joining his.

He finally opens his eyes and looks at her, panting, “God, Nancy . . .”

“Listen to me. I want you, all of you, your good parts and your bad.” she says as she struggles to control her own movements, waiting for him to fully understand the meaning of her words. She forces the last words out, trying desperately for them not to dissolve into a string of meaningless sounds, “Don't you ever forget that.”

“I won't,” he says panting, pulling her down to capture her mouth in a heart-stopping kiss and bucking up into her with a power that causes her to scream his name. He muffles the scream with another kiss and flips her over onto her back, settling himself firmly between her legs and continuing to push her nearly to the edge of reason.

And then three loud knocks on the door cause them to jump apart. “Jonathan! Jonathan, I know you're in there.”

“Shit, it's Hopper,” Jonathan says, untangling himself from her.

“I know Nancy's in there with you. I'm going to count to three, and then I'm coming in. You two better be decent,” Hopper calls again

“One.”

“Shit, shit, my shirt,” Nancy whispers.

“Two.”

“It’s over here,” Jonathan says scrambling across the bed to grab her discarded shirt from the corner of the room.

“Three.”

“Shit,” they both say at the same time as Hopper swings open the door.

He’s greeted by Jonathan and Nancy only in their jeans; Jonathan is trying to pull his up (she has no idea when she unbuttoned his jeans) as Nancy covers herself with the comforter. Seeing Hopper, Jonathan immediately moves in front of Nancy, exclaiming, “What the hell, Hop!”

“That’s what I should be asking you,” Hopper yells back. “Do you think I appreciate getting a call from my deputy telling me that Joyce’s kid got himself into another fight? Or finding out that you broke the nose of some shithead named Tommy? Huh?”

“What,” he and Nancy both say at the same time.

“You broke his nose?” Nancy yells at him.

“I didn’t know that,” Jonathan says defensively, turning back to her (and nearly losing his jeans in the process). “He hit me first and then I just hit him once, that’s all. He went down and didn’t get back up, and I left. That’s it, I swear.”

“Hold it,” Hopper yells again, bringing their full attention back to him.

“I hurry over here to find out exactly what happened before your mom gets home, to make sure you’re OK, and find this? Will alone in the living room looking scared out of his mind or embarrassed or whatever, and you and Nancy nearly naked doing god knows what! And what is that, a black eye?”

“Hopper,” Jonathan says more calmly, “can we talk about this in the living room so Nancy can get dressed?”

“Fine,” Hopper says heading out the door. “But pull up your pants before your brother sees you.”

2. In the Name of the Father

"What the hell just happened," Nancy thinks to herself. How did she go from one of the most intimate moments of her life to being yelled out by the the Hawkins Chief of Police. The entire situation is a bit of a blur to her now.

She grabs her shirt and pulls it over her head, finding that Jonathan did rip the neckline in his rush to get it off. How is she going to explain that to her mom? Oh well, she'll deal with that later.

Taking a minute to arrange her hair and straighten her clothes—she figures there's not much she can do about the marks on her neck and her swollen lips, everyone knows what they were doing anyway—and heads out into the living room.

Jonathan is sitting on the couch, head down. The anger is rolling off of him in waves—she feels it the minute she walks into the room.

Hopper is sitting on the side chair, elbows on his knees, staring straight at Jonathan. His anger is just as palpable.

And Will is sitting on the floor watching the scene, his game of Pitfall forgotten in the background.

No one says a word when she walks into the room, so she takes a seat next to Jonathan. He doesn't acknowledge her at first, but then reaches over and squeezes her hand for a brief moment. He won't look at her, but that small gesture sets her more at ease.

"So, are you going to explain what happened," Hop finally asks.

"There's not much to explain," says Jonathan bitterly. "I think it's pretty obvious what happened."

"Not from where I'm sitting, kid," Hop responds. "Start talking."

"Tommy said some pretty awful things about Nancy to me this morning at school, so I hit him."

"You started this?" Hop interrupts.

"Do you want me to tell you what happened or not," Jonathan responds coldly. Nancy can tell he's about at his limit. Hop nods his head.

"Nothing happened after that at school, a teacher even saw what happened and looked the other way. I thought it was over. But then Tommy confronted me before my last class and told me to meet him in the alley behind the theater. So I did. He brought a whole crew, as an audience I guess. I got there, he said some more shit about me and Nancy, and threw the first punch. He hit me straight in the left eye," he says pointing to his eye. "I went down, and he started to celebrate and didn't see me get back up. When he turned around, I hit him in the nose, and then he went down. I waited for him to get back up. He didn't, so I left. And then I came home. It took all of 20 minutes."

"Huh," Hopper says. "Nancy, what do you know about this?"

"As much as you. I didn't see any of it. Jonathan left school without talking to me today, so I came here looking for him. Will and I played Atari until he got here. And then I saw his eye, and we went to his room to talk," she says, suddenly blushing thinking about the compromising position Hopper found them in.

"I didn't know about the alley until now," she adds.

"And what do you think about this?" Hopper asks.

"Jonathan knows how I feel and that's all that matters," she replies, taking Jonathan's hand and breathing a sigh of relief when he squeezes back.

"Huh," Hopper repeats.

"OK, so this is what I see," he says, sitting back in the chair. "With two weeks left of school, you let this asshole, Tommy H, get under your skin and then let your anger or pride or both take over not just once but twice in a single day. You get yourself in a fight, break some kid's nose and, in the process, leave your kid brother at home alone, which you know your mom won't be happy about. So, what do you think I should do?"

“Nothing,” Jonathan says.

“And why is that? I have a police report about two kids fighting in a public alley, one with a broken nose and one with a black eye. You don’t think I should follow-up?”

“No. No property was damaged, we didn’t mess with anyone but each other. There’s nothing to do,” Jonathan responds, dropping Nancy’s hand and moving closer to the edge of the couch. “You know what I think is going on? You’re mad not because I got in a fight in public, but because you think my mom will like it, you stepping in to help with her boys.”

The temperature in the room plummets about 10 degrees immediately. Hop leans forward again, bringing himself nearly face to face with Jonathan, who isn’t backing down. Nancy and Will both leave their respective places on the couch and floor and come together at the side of the room, watching the scene unfold.

“Is that right,” Hop says, standing. “Well, kid, let me tell you. I’m not your dad, and I don’t want to be. But you, I think you’re becoming more and more like Lonnie every day. Picking fights, abandoning your family because you’re too caught up in your own mess to pay attention to anything outside of yourself. The fact that I found you back in your room messing around with your girlfriend instead of with your brother is testament to that.”

Nancy takes an audible breath, shocked by what Hopper just said to Jonathan, who is now visibly furious. He rises slowly, hands shaking. His a good five inches shorter than Hopper, but he somehow raises himself up to look Hopper in the eye.

“I know who my father is, and I know what he’s like better than anyone in this room. And I’m nothing like him,” Jonathan says coldly. “And if you ever compare me to Lonnie again, Tommy H won’t be the only one with a broken nose.”

Hopper starts to respond, but Jonathan shoves him out of the way and is out the front door in a matter of seconds.

Nancy immediately follows after him, calling his name as she opens

the door. He's just gotten into his car, and she runs to the driver's side window, knocking and pleading with him to roll it down. He looks up at her, and her heart breaks. He has tears in his eyes and looks absolutely wrecked. He holds her gaze for two seconds, maybe three, and then turns and backs the car around, taking off in a cloud of dirt. Nancy can't do anything but watch him go.

As the realization of what just happened settles in, Nancy turns on her heels and runs back through the Byers front door.

"What the hell, Hop?" she yells at him.

"I crossed a line there, I know," he says, rubbing his hands through his hair, his hat forgotten on the chair.

"You think?" she's yelling at this point, unable to control her anger. Hop just stands there looking guilty.

"Do you know what Tommy H said about me today? He wrote slut on my locker and then told Jonathan that I was Steve's sloppy seconds. In front of everyone. I didn't want Jonathan to fight him, but I know Jonathan. He fought for me, not himself. Listen close, because here's the difference between Jonathan and his dad. Lonnie fights the ones he loves. Jonathan fights *for* the one he loves."

Nancy takes a breath and finally looks away from Hopper to see Will sitting on the couch, looking nearly sick and turning paler by the moment. Her heart breaks for another Byers.

"I'm sorry, Will. I don't mean to yell," she says softly to him.

Will nods.

Turning back to Hopper, Nancy starts again, trying to keep her voice calm.

"I've seen Jonathan get in a fight twice in his life—the first time was when Steve said that Will deserved what happened to him and the second was today when someone called me a slut. I may not agree with it, but I sure do know why he does it. Jonathan can take care of himself—he's done that forever—and he doesn't care if he gets hurt. But if you hurt or attack someone he loves, he'll do anything to

protect them. And, yeah, I'm sure his temper and talent at fighting probably do come from his dad. But you just told him that he's no better than Lonnie, who flat out abandoned his family. Way to go, Chief."

"Nancy? Hopper? What's going on?"

Neither of them had noticed Joyce standing in the doorway until now.

"Jonathan passed me on the road, and he looked upset," she says. "Will, honey, are you OK? You don't look too good."

"I'm OK, Mom,"

"Good. Now, you two, tell me what's happening," she says turning back to Hopper and Nancy.

"Ah, Joyce, I think I messed up," Hop says.

"Oh, you think?" Nancy says sarcastically.

"Nancy, let him talk, please," Joyce says.

"I heard that Jonathan got in a fight this afternoon, so I came here to check on him. And I found Will alone in the living room, and Jonathan and Nancy in his room doing whatever, with Jonathan sporting one hell of a black eye," he explains.

"Um, Mom," Will says, starting to sound panicked.

"Just a second, honey," Joyce responds.

Nancy takes a look over at Will and notices that he looks worse than he did just a few minutes before. He's now an odd shade of green.

"At the time, I don't know, it looked like he didn't give a shit. He, um, he reminded me of Lonnie, and it really pissed me off. And I said some pretty hurtful things," Hopper continues.

"Like what?" Joyce asks.

“Well, I *told* him that he reminded me of Lonnie.”

“Jesus, Hop, are you kidding me? That’s the worst thing you could have said to him,” Joyce says.

“Yeah, I know. Nancy already informed me.”

“Mom,” Will calls again.

All three adults turn to Will just in time to see his eyes roll back in his head as he falls off the couch and collapses onto the floor.

“Will, oh god, Will!” Joyce calls.

Hopper drops to Will’s side and turns him onto his side just as his body starts to convulse.

“We’ve got to keep his airway open and try to make sure he doesn’t bite or swallow his tongue. Nancy, go the phone, get ready to call an ambulance if I ask you to. OK.”

“Yeah, got it,” she says as she runs to the phone.

Nancy hears an odd gurgling sound come from Will just as Joyce exclaims, “Oh my god, what is that? What is that?”

“I don’t know,” Hop responds. “Nancy, bring me a cup a glass, anything. Quick.”

Nancy runs to the kitchen, grabs a glass out of the sink and takes it into Hopper. And that’s when she sees it—a giant slug (at least she thinks that’s what it is) wiggling its way out of Will’s mouth.

“Oh my god,” she says, giving the cup to Hopper, who immediately traps the slug under the glass. Will has stopped convulsing, but he doesn’t open his eyes, and his color remains that odd shade of green.

“Will, honey, Will, wake up, sweetie, please wake up,” Joyce cries as she cradles his head in her lap.

Nancy doesn’t know what to do or where to go. That thing is from the Upside Down, she knows it, and it feels as if the world is closing

in on her.

“Jonathan. Nancy, you’ve got to find Jonathan. He may know more about this.” Hop says, grabbing her by the arms and pulling her back to the moment at hand. “Do you think you know where he might have gone.”

“Um, I don’t know, I can look, but I walked here,” she responds.

“You can take my car,” says Joyce. “Here take my keys.”

Nancy grabs them and immediately heads back to Jonathan’s room.

“Where are you going?” Hop asks. “The door is the other way.”

“A shirt. Jonathan left without a shirt,” she says.

“Yeah, that’s right. Good thinking.”

Nancy grabs his discarded shirt off of the floor of his bedroom. For a second time that day she asks herself what the hell just happened. She knew it was going to be a rough day the minute she saw the graffiti on her locker, but she had no idea it would turn out like this, with the Upside Down making its presence known once again, with Jonathan, her fellow monster hunter, off god knows where.

Running back into the living room, she stops to ask Hopper and Nancy what to do when she finds Jonathan

“Bring him home, please” Joyce says, tears streaming down her face.

She nods to Joyce before heading out the door. As she leaves, she hears Joyce whisper to Hop, “What are we going to do, Jim, what are we going to do?”

3. The Waiting Game

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone who's left kudos or written comments. I really appreciate it! I think this story may be a bit longer than I anticipated when I began, but we'll see! My goal is to post a new chapter every Saturday, and I'll try my best to stick to it! Enjoy!

Nancy makes it to the end of the Byers' driveway before she stops to think about what's happening. Her hands are shaking, and she can barely catch her breath. Overwhelmed by the smell of cigarette smoke that permeates the car (Joyce must smoke more than she realizes), Nancy rolls down the driver's side window and inhales the fresh spring air. "Think, Nancy, think," she says out loud, trying to gain control of her emotions.

Trying to keep her mind off of Will and that thing that came out of him, she tries to list all of the places Jonathan could be. The darkroom at school? The movie theater? Steve's? No, none of those places makes sense. She wishes she knew him before the Upside Down—maybe then she would have a better idea of his hiding places. The Jonathan she knows locks himself in his room when he's upset, headphones on and music loud enough to block out the world. Or he comes to her.

Her mind is reeling, so she decides it's best to simply drive, see where her instinct takes her. She concentrates on the feel of the steering wheel in her hand and the gravel below the tires, adjusts the mirrors, anything to avoid the thoughts in her head. And that's when it hits her—the Hawkins park and lake. It's where he took her the night she finally confessed her feelings to him. She turns the car in the direction of the park and hopes that she's right.

When she arrives, it takes her a minute to remember exactly where Jonathan took her that night—she wasn't really concentrating on their surroundings at the time. She follows her gut and takes a left off of the main road and drives until she sees his car at the edge of the lake. She pulls in next to him, breathing a sigh of relief.

She seems him lying on the hood of his car looking up at the sky. He's managed to find a shirt, and she thinks it must be one of the boys' guessing by how small it is on him. He must have heard her pull up, but he doesn't turn to see who's joined him. So she takes her time, pulls herself together, grabs his shirt off of the passenger seat, and gets out of the car.

"You shouldn't have come, Nancy," Jonathan says before she even closes the car door.

"Yes, I should have," she says in return.

"I don't want to see anyone right now," he says, his voice as cold as she's ever heard it. The change in his tone is shocking to her, especially after what they experienced together just a short while ago.

"I'm not here because of you. I'm here because of Will. Something's happened," she says quickly, before he can interrupt her.

Jonathan immediately sits up and looks at her, the turmoil he's feeling is evident in his eyes. It's all she can do to stop herself from walking over and taking him in her arms.

"What's going on? Is he OK?"

"I don't know," she says stepping closer to him. "After you left, he just looked worse and worse. I thought he was just upset, but then, he collapsed. And he turned this weird shade of green and this, um, thing came out of his mouth. I don't know what it was, but it's not from our world," she stops to catch her breath. "Hopper and Joyce asked me to find you and bring you home," she finishes as calmly and quickly as she can.

"Oh shit," he says, scrambling off of the hood of the car. "Let's go."

"What about your mom's car?"

"Leave it. We'll get it later," he says. "I need you to tell me everything that happened," adding as he gets into the driver's side of the car.

Nancy runs to the passenger side and hops in. Jonathan has already started the car and is peeling out of the lot before she's even shut her door.

She struggles to buckle her seat belt before she turns and looks at Jonathan. He's even more of a wreck than he was earlier, his forehead now creased with worry.

"Jonathan," she begins.

"I don't want to talk about it, Nancy," he says.

"I brought you a shirt in case you want to change," she says quietly.

"Oh, thanks," he says guiltily, finally glancing her way. When he catches her eye, his face softens a little, but he then turns his eyes back to the road.

"Tell me what happened. Everything," he says.

So Nancy fills the time in the car by explaining everything that happened after Jonathan left home earlier in the evening, trying her best to keep her own emotions—and nightmares—at bay.

When they arrive back at the Byers' house, no cars are in the driveway. Jonathan scrambles out of the car as fast as he can and rushes through the front door.

"Mom! Mom! Will!" Nancy can hear him call as she follows him in. He's running from room to room looking for anyone. They must have taken Will to the hospital or somewhere, so she starts to look for a note or a sign of any kind. She ends up finding a note from Joyce on the dining room table.

"Jonathan, in here. I found a note," she yells back to him

He runs to her side, grabbing the note from her hands and starting to read.

"Can you read it aloud? I need to know, too," Nancy asks.

"We took Will to a place that Hopper thinks can help him. I don't know how long we will be gone. Please stay here or at Nancy's so we can find you. Mom"

Jonathan looks up at Nancy. "I don't even know what this means."

"It means that we wait," she says, taking his arm. She's surprised, but relieved, that he lets her touch him, and she leads him back to the couch.

Jonathan sits with his elbows on his knees, head in his hands. Nancy has to fight the urge to reach out to him again, sitting on her own hands to keep the desire at bay.

"So, you're sure it was alive, the thing that came out of him," Jonathans asks.

"Yes, I'm sure. Hopper trapped it in the glass, but it was still moving. He must have taken it with him," she responds.

"God, what could it be? And is it the first time this has happened," he asks. "I mean I've been worried about Will for a while, his coughing fits. I sometimes go into his room at night to make sure he's sleeping and OK. But I hear him coughing in the bathroom a lot—do you think this could have been happening since he's been back?" He finally turns to look at her, a questioning look on his face.

"I don't know," Nancy says, looking back at him. The eye Tommy hit has only gotten worse, and she's worried it will only swell more if they don't take care of it. "I'm going to get some ice for your eye," she says, grateful for the excuse to move, to do something. She goes into the kitchen and finds a clean towel, which she fills with the few ice cubes she finds in the freezer.

When she returns, Jonathan is now leaning back, his head resting on the couch. She sits down and turns his face towards hers, lightly placing the makeshift ice pack onto his eye. He winces. "I'm sorry," she says.

"It's OK," Jonathan replies, adding "Thanks for the ice."

"Sure."

They sit in an awkward silence, and Nancy is reminded of the night she, Jonathan, and Joyce waited for Hopper to bring the boys and Eleven to them. How did they find themselves back in this place again?

“Seems familiar, huh” Jonathan says.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” she says with a slight laugh. He joins her after a beat or two. Once the moment passes, they sit in silence once again.

“I’m sorry, Nancy,” Jonathan says after a few moments pass.

“For what?”

“For fighting, for getting so angry, for leaving, for . . . all of it.”

“You have nothing to apologize to me for, Jonathan. I thought that I made that clear,” she adds sadly.

“What Hopper said, I don’t know, it just hit a bit too close to home.”

“I let him have it after you left.”

“Really?”

“Yay. I was pretty harsh, too. I think he felt pretty bad about what he said, Jonathan.”

He lets out what can only be described as a bone-deep sigh. “I was probably out of line. I was just so mad at him for walking in on us and for, I don’t know, trying to play the father figure or something.”

“I don’t know,” he says again.

“It’s OK, Jonathan, you had a right to be mad. And I think you both said some things in the heat of the moment. But you don’t need to apologize to me. I’m on your side,” she says, reaching over and touching his leg. She half expects him to flinch, but he doesn’t, instead bumping his knee into hers. She takes this as an invitation, and she scoots closer to him putting her head on his shoulder. He leans down and kisses the top of her head, and she feels an immediate

sense of warmth wash over her.

“What are we going to do, Nancy? I can’t stay here just waiting. I feel like I’m going to crawl out of my skin.”

“Well, if you changed into the shirt I brought you earlier, you might feel a bit better,” she says, poking him in the ribs.

“Oh god, that’s right. I totally forgot,” he says, getting up and looking for the shirt.

“It’s on the table,” Nancy says, pointing to the dining room.

She watches him as he changes shirts, remembering where they had been barely two hours ago. She’s hit by a pang of desire so strong, it nearly takes her breath away. But when he turns back to her, a look of exhaustion on his face, it fades just as quickly.

“How did I not see this coming,” he says returning to the couch “God, Nancy, how did I miss this?”

“I don’t know, I really don’t. Maybe he hid it from everyone—Will’s good at hiding, right? He wasn’t conscious tonight when it happened, remember?”

“Yeah, I know, but still. I wasn’t here the night he was taken last year, and I wasn’t here tonight. And I hadn’t even noticed how sick he really was. How good of a brother am I, really?”

“Stop, Jonathan. How could you have ever guessed this was the case? We were told the atmosphere in that place was toxic, but slugs? Come on,” she says, an idea finally dawning on her. “You know who might know more than we do?”

Jonathan looks at her expectantly, then the realization hits him. “Mike,” they both say at the same time.

Jumping up and grabbing his car keys, he takes her hand and leads her out the front door.

4. The More You Know

Notes for the Chapter:

And the gang (minus one) finally makes an appearance! I forget how much fun they are, and I hope I can work them into the story more as we go along! I hope everyone had a lovely Thanksgiving and got to spend some time with their favorite fan fiction.

Nancy doesn't bother using the front door when she and Jonathan arrive at her house, instead bursting through the basement one, hoping to find Mike, Dustin, and Lucas together. She's greeted only by Mike, who's pouring over his D&D books.

"Hey, don't you ever knock?" Mike yells at his sister.

"It's my house, too. I don't have to knock," she responds snidely. "Besides, I need to talk to you."

"What about," Mike asks.

"Will," Jonathan responds for Nancy.

Mike notices Jonathan for the first time. "What happened to your eye?"

"Never mind my eye," Jonathan says, getting annoyed. "What do you know about Will?"

"What do you mean? I know he went home after school to play Atari and that he's coming over here tomorrow for our next campaign," Mike says.

"See, that's the thing, he's not," Nancy jumps in. "He got sick tonight, really sick. Chief Hopper and Joyce took him somewhere, we don't know where, but we think you might know what's going on."

"What do you mean he got sick," Mike asks, worry taking over his features. "What happened?"

“Call Lucas and Dustin and get them over here. Then we’ll tell you,” Jonathan says.

“Uh, OK. Give me sec,” Mike says as he rushes up the stairs.

Nancy pulls Jonathan down onto their old couch. Just as they get settled, they hear Nancy’s mom call from above, “Hey Nance, is that you?”

Before they can respond, Karen Wheeler is half-way down the stairs. The minute she sees Jonathan, she stops, a look of shock on her face. “What’s happened,” she asks, hurrying down the remaining stairs. “Jonathan, are you OK?”

Karen continues to assault them with a barrage of questions, and Jonathan retreats even further into himself.

“Mom, Mom, it’s OK,” Nancy finally butts in. “Jonathan is fine, we’ve iced his eye. And it’s nothing to worry about—just a stupid misunderstanding at school.”

“A misunderstanding? You mean a fight—I’m not stupid, you know.” Turning to Jonathan, she asks “Do you need more ice? Anything?”

“No, Mrs. Wheeler, thanks, I’m fine,” Jonathan says attempting a smile.

They are interrupted by Mike crashing down the stairs. “Dustin and Lucas will be here any minute. Now, tell me what happened to Will,” he says when he reaches the basement. “And your eye.”

“Will? What happened to Will?” Karen asks, her attention now turned to her son.

“Mom, Will got sick tonight. Joyce and Chief Hopper took him to get help, but Jonathan and I need to talk to the boys to see if they know what might be wrong with him. Can we have some time with them, please,” Nancy asks, trying to calm her mother.

“I don’t know, I really need to understand what’s going on here. A fight and then this? Are they connected?”

“No, Mom, they aren’t connected at all. Can we just talk to the guys alone, please? I promise I’ll fill you in on everything once we know more,” Nancy pleads with her mother.

Karen finally gives in. “I expect a full report later,” she says. “Jonathan, do let me know if you need anything for that eye. It looks painful,” she adds on her way upstairs.

Jonathan nods in return and then collapses onto the couch. “Wow, your mom is something else,” he says to Nancy and Mike.

“Tell me about it,” Nancy and Mike say in unison.

“Ok, come on, what happened?” Mike asks again.

“We’re only going to tell the story once, and we want all of you here when we do,” Nancy says.

The three of them wait in awkward silence for Dustin and Lucas to arrive. Nancy takes Jonathan’s hand again and absently strokes his matching scar—it’s a habit that she’s formed over the last few months, one that comforts them both.

“If we have to wait, can you two not touch or anything? It’s just weird,” Mike says

“Get over it, Mike. It’s not as if we’re making out or something,” she says, knowing that this will upset him even more.

“God, gross,” he says, raising his voice, but he’s drowned out by the arrival of Dustin and Lucas, who have managed to throw themselves through the back door in a tangled mess of gangly arms and legs.

“What’s going on? Where’s Will?” Lucas says as he looks around the basement.

“Yeah, what the hell happened?” Dustin adds.

“Hold on, hold on,” Nancy says. “One at a time.”

Dustin and Lucas calm down long enough to notice Jonathan sitting on the couch.

“Dude, your eye!” Lucas exclaims.

“So it’s true,” Dustin adds, just as loudly. “I heard that you broke Tommy H.’s nose, but I didn’t believe it at first. But it’s true, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s true,” Jonathan says with a smirk.

“Awesome!” “Wicked!” “You kick ass!”

The three boys all exclaim at once.

“Hold on, hold on,” Jonathan yells to be heard over the preteens. “Tommy said some bad things about Nancy and me, and I couldn’t let him say them again. Period. End of story. And it isn’t cool—do you know how much my eye hurts? And how mad Nancy got at me? Believe me, neither of those things is cool.”

“Tell me about it,” Mike says again, this time on his own.

“Hello, I’m in the room, Mike,” Nancy says standing up, trying to gain control of the situation. “And can we talk about Will now? That’s why we came here in the first place.”

The boys all settle down and, finally, focus their attention on Nancy. “You still kick ass,” Dustin says under his breath to Jonathan, who gives him the first genuine smile he’s shared all night.

“Dustin!” Nancy calls again, poking Jonathan in the ribs at the same time.

“Ouch, Nance,” Jonathan says.

“Am I the only one here who cares about Will more than my boyfriend’s black eye?”

After a moment of snickering, the boys finally give her their full attention.

“Ok, earlier tonight, Will had an episode, for lack of a better word. I know that he’s prone to coughing fits—we’ve all witnessed those—but this was different. He passed out and had convulsions. And then,” she takes a shuddering breath, “this thing crawled out of his mouth.”

“Thing,” Mike asks. “What do you mean by thing?”

“It was like a slug, I guess. Black and wiggling. Not like anything I’ve ever seen,” Nancy pauses. “I think it had to be from the Upside Down.” She shudders as she says the words.

“What happened next,” Dustin asks, looking around to catch the eyes of both Mike and Lucas.

“Chief Hopper caught the slug in a glass, and he asked me to get Jonathan—he had left earlier—and bring him home. By the time we got home, the Chief, Joyce, and Will were gone. They left us a note saying they took Will to get help and would be home soon. And that’s all we know,” Nancy finishes.

“And we hoped that you might be able to shed some light on what happened,” Jonathan picks up the conversation. “I spend as much time with Will as I can, but I don’t see him for nearly as long as you three do. Do you know anything about this?”

Jonathan is greeted with silence. He lets a minute or two pass.

“OK, guys, what do you know?” he asks again.

“Seriously, it couldn’t be more obvious that you know something,” Nancy adds.

“Mike, come on,” Jonathan says. “It’s Will. I’ll do anything to help him, but I can’t help if I don’t know what’s going on.”

Mike looks from Jonathan to Nancy nervously and finally breaks.

“We don’t really know what’s going on, but we know that this isn’t the first time this has happened,” Mike finally says.

“Ah, man, Mike,” Dustin says, followed by Lucas, “We promised Will.”

“I know, I know,” Mike says. “But what if this is really serious, what if he doesn’t get better this time?”

“What do you know?” Jonathan asks again more firmly.

"Last weekend during our campaign Will just started looking weird, I don't know, sorta green," Mike begins. "And then he started to cough really bad, like he couldn't catch his breath, and then he passed out for a minute."

"Passed out?" Jonathan asks.

"Yeah, like he went away for a second, went limp. But he didn't convulse or anything," Mike finishes.

"We tried to wake him up, shook him a bit, and he came to in a minute or so," Lucas adds.

"And that's when we saw it on the floor, something black and slimy. I guess a slug," Dustin says.

"What did you do?" Jonathan asks, sounding and looking more worried as the conversation goes on.

"Well, we all jumped back—it was gross and weird, dude," Dustin begins again.

"But then Will went to the bathroom, grabbed some tissue and picked it up, and he flushed it down the toilet," Mike says.

"Then we asked him a million questions, just like you're doing now," Lucas cuts in. "At first, he didn't want to tell us anything, told us to forget about it, but you can't forget about something like that."

"No kidding," Nancy throws in.

"We finally got him to admit that this has been happening since he came back, that his coughing fits usually result in one of those slugs coming up. He says he always flushes them down the toilet or the drain," Mike finishes.

"This has been happening since he came back?" Jonathan says standing. Turning to Nancy, he continues, more agitated, "How did I miss this? Every night when he has a coughing fit I go into his room to be with him, to make sure he's OK. He's never said anything, and I've never seen anything. After everything that's happened this year, why didn't I pay more attention?"

“Jonathan, stop. Will was hiding this from everyone, not just you.”

“Maybe if I had been paying more attention to him instead of. . .” Jonathan trails off, looking guiltily at Nancy. She knows he was going to say “you,” and it hurt. A lot.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” Nancy says, holding back tears.

Mike, Lucas, and Dustin stand uncomfortably at the sidelines, until Dustin finally says, “Um, guys, Will?”

“Yeah, yeah, sorry,” says Jonathan, shaking his head. “So did you talk more about this with him? Why didn’t he tell anyone?”

“He said that he didn’t want to worry anyone and asked us not to tell,” Mike says.

“Made us spit swear not to tell,” Lucas adds.

“Why?” Jonathan asks yet again, growing more frustrated.

“I don’t know,” Mike says. “I think he thought he’d get in trouble or something. And I think he was scared.”

Jonathan sits back down, running his hands through his hair. The boys all take a seat at their D & D table looking just as worried as Jonathan.

“What if those things are still alive?” Nancy says quietly from the back of the room. She had faded to the background after her last exchange with Jonathan, not quite sure how to process all that was happening. She felt as if the world had shifted and hadn’t quite righted itself yet.

“You mean the slugs?” asks Dustin.

“Yes. The slugs. What if they’re all still alive?”

“Oh god, I hadn’t thought of that,” Mike says, looking around at his friends.

As Nancy contemplates the renewed presence of the Upside Down in

her world, the fear she hasn't felt in months comes back all at once. She looks over at Jonathan, hoping that he'll sense it, but he's still got his head down, lost in his own world. She feels her composure start to break, something she doesn't want her brother or his friends to see.

"I've got to get out of here," she says suddenly and bolts up the stairs to her room.

Nancy hears Jonathan calling her name as he follows her up the stairs to her room, but she's not ready to see him. Not yet.

She retreats to the top of her bed, pulling her knees to her chest and making herself as small as possible. And she finally lets the tears that she's been holding onto for the last few hours flow freely. She thought it was over. The nightmares that have plagued her were fewer and farther between, and, although she'll never get over the loss of Barb, Jonathan had made her feel safe, less alone, even happy. And now? Now the nightmares have become reality once again, and her relationship with Jonathan is far less secure than she realized.

"Nancy? Nancy, please let me in," she hears Jonathan say from the other side of her door. She refuses to answer.

After waiting a minute or more, Jonathan tries again. "I'm sorry for what I said. I wasn't thinking straight. I'm not thinking straight. Just please let me in."

She still doesn't answer. She hears him sigh and then slide himself down her door. She realizes he's sitting at threshold to her room, waiting for her to respond.

As much as she doesn't want to talk to him, she feels pulled to him. She eventually gets up, goes to her door and sits down, leaning her back against the cold wood. She's a mirror image of Jonathan on the other side.

"Nance?"

"Yes," she finally answers.

“Please let me in.”

“I don’t think I can, Jonathan.”

“Why? I need to talk to you, to see you. Please don’t shut me out.”

“Jonathan, tell me you know of the saying about the pot calling the kettle black.”

From what she can tell by the movement she feels through the door, he must have shrugged his shoulders.

“I know . . . I thought we were done with it, thought we were all getting better.”

“Me, too.”

“But it was never really over, was it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that I regretted our relationship. You know that, right?”

“I think so.”

“You think?”

She nods her head, forgetting that he can’t see her.

“God, Nancy. For as much as I hate what we all went through last year, I wouldn’t take it back. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be with you now.”

“Then why did you say it?”

“I don’t know. I feel bad that I haven’t seen more of Will lately, and it’s not just because I’m with you. It’s because I’m working to pay of his medical bills and studying so I can get into college. And when I think back to what happened—that I was supposed to be home the night he was taken—the guilt I feel is almost overwhelming. And now this? I wasn’t there for him again. I didn’t get home on time because I

fought Tommy. And when I did get home, I was with you. And then I ran off. And now . . . what if he's gone, Nancy? What if he doesn't come back?"

"Don't say that, Jonathan. We don't know anything yet. And I understand how guilty you feel. I still feel it, too."

Nancy stands up and turns herself to face the door. "Jonathan, you can come in."

She hears him jump up and struggle to find his balance before he opens the door. He steps in slowly, closing and locking the door behind him (he knows my mother too well, she thinks). They simply stare at each other for a moment before Jonathan closes the gap between them, taking her face in his hands and kissing her deeply.

There it is, again, she thinks, that passion that she loves so much. She opens her mouth to deepen the kiss even more and wraps her arms around his neck. He moves his hands down her back to settle on her waist and pulls her close to him and then begins to walk her backwards until her legs hit the side of her bed. She sits down, pulling him with her, never stopping to break their kiss.

Jonathan settles himself between her legs, and she wraps herself around him, bringing him even closer, craving the pressure of his body next to hers. He finally breaks their kiss and meets her eyes. She smiles softly at him, eliciting a look of such tenderness that she has to close her eyes to keep from crying all over again. Jonathan turns her head to the side and slowly plants a series of kisses down her neck, stopping to whisper in her ear. "I love you. I'm so sorry I made you doubt that."

Her body lets go of the final bit of tension she'd been holding since running out of the basement, and Jonathan takes advantage of the moment to settle himself by her side, pulling her into him and cocooning her in his arms and legs.

"I'm scared, Jonathan."

"Me, too."

They lose track of how long they stay like this, huddled together against the fear and uncertainty they both feel. A loud knock on the door startles them, as Karen calls, "Nancy, Jonathan. Chief Hopper is here. He needs to talk to you."

"Um, we'll be down in a second," Nancy calls back.

Jonathan pulls himself up and rubs his hands over his face. "Are you OK," Nancy asks.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

She leans over to him and places a gentle kiss on his lips. "Let's go," she says and leads him out of her room and down the hall to the Chief, who is waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

5. Summer Breeze

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, I originally hoped to post a chapter once a week, but the holidays got the best of me! I was finally able to get back to the story and plan to keep it moving along again. I am excited to say that Steve does make an appearance in this chapter--I couldn't keep him away for long. As always, I appreciate everyone who's read the story and left kudos over the past month. I hope you enjoy the latest chapter!

Jonathan makes his way past Nancy on the stairs, eager to speak to Hopper. Before he reaches the bottom of the stairs, he's already started to question Hop. "Where's Will? How is he?"

"I'll tell you, I promise. But I need to talk to both of you, alone," Hop says the last word louder than the rest and looks over Nancy's shoulder toward the basement door.

Nancy turns and looks and sees three heads peeking around the corner, eager looks on their faces. Nancy motions for them to go away, but Mike shakes his head stubbornly. She knows that Hop won't say anything in their presence, so she decides to convince them in person.

"Will you three go back downstairs?"

"We deserve to know, too," Mike says, as Dustin and Lucas shake their heads in agreement.

"I know you do, but Jonathan deserves to know more than any of you, and we need Chief Hopper to share whatever he can with us. I promise I'll tell you whatever we find out."

"Spit swear," Lucas says.

"What?"

"I said spit swear," he says again.

“Nancy, you coming in for this? I can’t wait much longer,” Hop calls from the living room.

“I’ll be right there,” Nancy calls back. “Fine, I’ll spit swear,” she says.

She spits into her right hand, and Mike does the same. They shake hands once, and the three boys turn to go back down into the basement.

Nancy runs back into the living room wiping her hand on her pants along the way.

“Are they gone?” Hop asks her as she returns to Jonathan’s side.

“Yes, they won’t bother us for a bit.”

“OK. First things first—Will is OK. Or at least he’s out of danger for now,” Hop starts.

“Where is he?” Jonathan asks again.

“I’m getting there, just give me a second. After you left, Nancy, Will didn’t regain consciousness, so I took him the only place I thought may be able to help him, especially after I saw that thing come out of his mouth.”

“You didn’t,” Nancy says.

“What choice did I have? Take him and that thing to the local prompt care? I went to the one place that I thought could help him and may actually know what’s going on.”

“Wait,” Jonathan breaks in. “You took him to the Hawkins lab? Where Eleven came from?”

“Yeah, I did,” Hopper replies, looking Jonathan directly in the eye.

“But . . .” Jonathan begins.

“No buts,” Hopper says. “They didn’t look happy to see us, but they helped. They stabilized Will and took that thing from us. And they think they know what’s wrong with him, too. But they need to keep

him for a bit. Your mom's there with him now—and she's not leaving until he wakes up and we know what's going on."

"When can I see him? Can I go now?" Jonathan says as he starts to gather himself to leave.

"No, you can't," Hopper replies.

"I need you to go home and wait for us there. Will is stable, but he's not out of the woods, and the only person they are allowing to see him is Joyce. If you have to wait, I'd rather you wait at home."

"Really? You really expect me to wait at home while Will is in danger?"

"Yes, I do."

"I can't do that, Hop. I won't do that."

"You will and don't argue with me on this. I can't explain everything to you now, but believe me—it's better for you to be at home right now. I promise that I'll let you know the minute you can come see Will. I promise," Hop says, placing his hand on Jonathan's shoulder.

Jonathan nods once, agreeing for the moment.

"Can you get home?" Hop asks.

"Yeah, I've got my car," Jonathan says. "Oh wait," he says turning back to Hop. "We left mom's car at the lake. We should probably go get it."

"Don't worry about it. I can send Callahan out to pick it up later. Do you have the keys handy?"

"Yeah, I've got them. They're in my room. Just a sec," Nancy says running up the stairs.

When she comes back down, Jonathan and Hopper are talking quietly in the corner. Hop has both hands on Jonathan's shoulders, and he's leaning down to look Jonathan directly in the eyes. From the look on his face, she imagines that he's apologizing. But she can't quite read

Jonathan's expression from where she stands. But he is holding Hop's eye and not looking away, which is a good sign. She steps back up the stairs and waits for them to finish. She only has to wait a moment or two before the two part, nodding their heads in unison.

"Here are the keys," Nancy says handing them to Hop. "And, um, we spoke to Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, and you need to know that this isn't the first time this has happened to Will."

"What?" Hopper asks, turning his attention to Nancy.

"Jonathan and I came over here to ask them what they know, and we finally got them to admit that they've seen Will have a fit with the slugs. Will begged them not to tell, and they didn't. But . . ."

"But nothing. I need to see them," Hop says starting to head into the kitchen. Nancy steps in front of him.

"Please, not now. They don't know any more than we do. It happened recently—Will had a coughing fit, and he coughed up a slug then, too. Will made them swear not to tell anyone. We were lucky they even told us. Please don't scare them any more than they are already."

"Fine," Hopper replies, taking his hat off and wringing it in his hands. "But I'll need to talk to them soon. We need to know everything—it's the only way we can help Will. Tell them that I'll be back to see them."

"Of course. And, um, Hopper? What about the slugs? If Will has coughed them up before, do you think they can still be alive? And if they're alive, then . . ."

Nancy can't bring herself to finish the thought.

"You and me both, Nancy," Hop says. "Now, I've got to go. Head home and try to get some rest. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Nancy turns to Jonathan after Hop has left. "You go talk to the boys, and I'll get our stuff. We can then head over to your place."

"Nancy, you don't need to come with me. I won't be able to sleep anyway, you may as well stay here and get some rest," Jonathan

responds.

“Do you really think I could sleep now? Without you? And it’s not about me. You shouldn’t alone tonight, Jonathan.”

He gives her a small smile. “I’ll go talk to the dungeon masters.”

“I’ll meet you downstairs,” she says and runs up the stairs to her room, gathering a few things she thinks she may need. Along with a change of clothes and her hairbrush, she opens the drawer of her night stand and takes out the gun Jonathan let her use last fall. She has no idea if those slugs are still around or how many there may be or how big. She figures they’d better be safe than sorry.

“What are you doing with that thing, Nancy,” her mother says, startling Nancy so much that she nearly drops the gun.

“Mom, don’t do that. I could have dropped it,” Nancy replies angrily.

“You mean it’s loaded? You have a loaded gun in my house?”

“No, it’s not loaded, but it’s not something I want to drop either.”

“Why is it here?” her mother asks tersely.

“Jonathan and I used it last fall, and I’ve kept it by my bed ever since. I don’t feel safe without it.”

“Why do you need it now? What’s happened?”

“Something’s going on with Will. He had an episode tonight, one that we think is related to the time he was away. He’s at the Hawkins lab with Joyce, and he’s stable. But I just don’t feel safe right now. This makes me feel better.”

“OK. And where are you going with it?”

“Jonathan’s. I’m staying with him tonight.”

“You are doing no such thing. It’s a school night and near 10 o’clock. If you really think that I’ll let you out of the house with a gun to stay the night—alone I take it—at your boyfriend’s house, you need to

think again.”

“I can’t let him stay alone tonight, not with Will like this. And there’s two more weeks of school left—I can skip a day, and it won’t affect me. I’m going, mom, and you can’t stop me.”

“Nancy, I understand how close you and Jonathan are, but I just don’t feel right about this. And you still haven’t told me how Jonathan got his black eye. I’m worried about you—and I don’t want you to be put in danger like before,” Karen says more gently.

“It’s a bit too late to worry about danger, Mom, but don’t worry. I can take care of myself. And the black eye has nothing to do with this. Jonathan got into a fight because someone called me a slut.” Karen visibly jumps at the word slut, but Nancy doesn’t let her respond. “That’s not important, mom—right now, I need to wait with Jonathan until we know more about Will. I won’t leave him alone.”

Karen stands in the middle of Nancy’s doorway, arms crossed and eyes squinted, mulling over Nancy’s story. Nancy stands directly in front of her, bag on her shoulder, and waits.

“Fine, but you will explain more to me soon. And I’m serious—I hate feeling like I’m two steps behind everyone else all the time,” her mother finally says.

“I promise,” Nancy says, giving her mom a kiss on the cheek as she brushes past her and down the stairs. On her way to the basement, Nancy stops in front of the kitchen phone. Without thinking, she picks it up and dials Steve’s number. His mom picks up on the first ring.

“Harrington residence.”

“Hi, Mrs. Harrington. It’s Nancy. Can I talk to Steve?”

“Oh, hi, Nancy. Just as second.” Nancy can hear Steve’s mom calling to him and him yelling back, but can’t quite make out what they are saying.

“Nancy, Steve will be with you in a second. He’s going to pick up in his room,” his mom says after a minute or two.

“Thanks so much,” Nancy says.

“Hey Nance,” Steve says as he picks up, and she hears his mom hang up her line. “What’s going on?”

“I need a favor, Steve.”

“It’s 10 o’clock on a school night, Nance, I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

“You’re an idiot, Steve Harrington.”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve says laughing. “What do you need?”

“So, something bad happened tonight, and Jonathan’s pretty upset. I need to help him relax, and I wondered if you could help me out.”

“Does this have something to do with his fight with Tommy?”

“No, it’s not about that, it’s something else, something important. Can you help?”

“Sure, I think I’ve got something that will work.”

“Great. Can you meet us at Jonathan’s house in 15 minutes?”

“Can do. I’ll head over there now.”

“Thanks so much, Steve. I really appreciate it,” Nancy says relieved.

“Sure. See you soon,” Steve says and hangs up. With that settled, Nancy heads down to the basement to get Jonathan.

When Nancy and Jonathan make it back to the Byers house, Steve is waiting for them on the front porch.

“What’s Steve doing here,” Jonathan asks.

“I asked him to come over,” Nancy says.

“Nancy, this isn’t really a good time to hang out, you know. I really

just want to be alone.”

“Jonathan, trust me, OK,” Nancy says and gets out of the car.

“Hey Steve,” she calls as she approaches the porch.

“Hey, Nance. Hey, Byers,” Steve returns. “Whoa, man, your eye. Looks like Tommy has a good right punch.”

“Yeah, he does, but mine’s better,” Jonathan fires back.

“I heard. Nicely done, taking him down with a single punch twice in one day. The broken nose was just icing on the cake,” Steve says, giving Jonathan a congratulatory clap on the back.

Jonathan smiles and shakes his head as he unlocks the door. Once in the house, he calls for the dog, Ziggy, and takes him out back.

“OK, if this isn’t about Tommy, what’s going on? Where is everybody?” Steve asks.

“It’s Will,” Nancy says. “He had an episode tonight—a really bad fit that left him unconscious. And then this thing came out of his mouth. Chief Hopper and Joyce took him to the Hawkins lab to get help.”

“When you say thing, what do you mean,” Steve asks.

“It was a like a slug or something. Very gross and very much from the Upside Down,” Nancy responds.

“Oh God,” Steve responds. “Is Will OK? And is that thing still alive?”

“Will’s stable,” Jonathan says as he walks back into the room. “And we don’t know about the slug. I didn’t see it, Nancy did, and she and Hopper are pretty worried about it. But we don’t know anything yet. All we can do is wait and see.” Jonathan drops himself into a chair at the dining room table and throws his house keys across the table top.

“Now I know why you called, Nance. I have something that I can think can help the time go by a bit faster,” Steve says.

“Really? And what can that be?” Jonathan asks, clearly annoyed.

"This," Steve says pulling out a clear plastic bag filled with weed.

"Pot? Seriously? You want me to get high?" Jonathan replies, growing more agitated by the moment.

"Yeah, I do," Steve says. "Like you said, all we can do is wait and see. We may as well have a little fun as we pass the time, and it might make you feel a bit better."

Jonathan bitterly laughs off Steve's comment and heads back to his room. Nancy quickly follows.

"Wait, Jonathan," she says as she rounds the corner to his room. Jonathan has thrown himself onto his bed and is about ready to put his headphones on, clearly wanting to drown out the situation. She grabs the headphones out of his hand and sits down next to him on the bed.

"Please give this a try. I know you've smoked pot before, and what can it hurt? I want you to get some rest, and I don't think that's something you or I can do on our own right now."

"I know that, Nancy, but I also don't want to get high. What if Hop comes back? Imagine what will happen if he sees the three of us smoking weed after everything else that went down today. How will that be good for me?"

"He won't be back for hours, I'm sure. And if he comes back, I'll take the heat on this one. It was my idea in the first place, and both you and Steve can truthfully back me up on that."

"I don't know, Nancy. Can't we just listen to some music and try to sleep?"

"Come sit with me and Steve, smoke or don't. Let's just try to take our mind off of things for a little while," she says, adding a final "please."

Jonathan thinks for a moment and then raises himself off of his bed. "Fine, but I'm not going to get high."

"Thank you," Nancy says grabbing his hand and dragging him into

the living room.

During the five minutes or so they were gone, Steve has managed to clear off the coffee table, turn on the stereo, and is in the process of rolling a joint.

“Nice to see you two. Come join me,” he says, pointing to the couch cushions next to him.

“Do you have a candle or any incense that we can burn, Jonathan?”

“Just a sec,” Jonathan says, venturing into the kitchen. He’s back far sooner than Nancy expected, which makes her wonder if this is more of a normal occurrence in his house that he lets on. He comes back into the living room with incense and a well-used burner and sets it down on the coffee table. When both she and Steve stop to look at him, he shrugs, “My mom. It helps her relax.”

“Well, perhaps you should follow her lead a bit more,” Steve says smirking.

“Ha, ha,” Jonathan says, leaning back. “Oh god, it’s my mom’s Seals and Crofts record. Did you change the album or just turn on the stereo?”

“I just turned it on and played whatever was on the turntable. Besides, I don’t think it’s too bad—it even sets the mood a bit,” Steve replies.

“Summer Breeze is one of my mom’s favorite songs. I’ve heard it so often that it’s comforting,” Nancy adds.

“If you think making me watch you smoke pot while listening to Summer Breeze is going to calm me down then you clearly don’t know me very well,” Jonathan mumbles.

“I know you better than you think, Jonathan Byers, and I bet you’ll be humming along by the end of the song,” Nancy says, elbowing him in the ribs.

“I already have a black eye, I don’t need bruised ribs.”

"I'll admit that there's some fucked up things happening in your life right now, Jonathan, but come on, cut us some slack," Steve responds. Jonathan mumbles a "sorry" and leans back again. Steve finishes rolling the joint, licks the seam, and picks up Jonathan's Zippo lighter. "This looks familiar," he mumbles and hands the joint and lighter to Nancy.

"Ladies first," he says with a grin.

"That's sweet, Steve, but there's only one problem—I've never smoked pot before. I don't know what to do."

"What? We never smoked together?"

"Nope. Is it like a cigarette?"

"Take the joint and hold it in your mouth with one hand, and I'll light it for you. You just need to inhale and hold the smoke for as long as you can before blowing it out." "

Ok, that sounds easy," Nancy says, bringing the joint to her lip. Steve lights the joint, and she inhales but winds up having a huge coughing fit in the process. "God, that's terrible," she coughs.

"That's pretty normal for your first time." Nancy is surprised to hear Jonathan's voice respond to her and more surprised that he leans in to take the joint from her hands. "Let's try this instead, it might make it a bit easier for you. When I nod, open your mouth and breathe in."

He lights the joint and inhales deeply then turns to Nancy. He leans in as if to kiss her and nods his head. Nancy opens her mouth, and Jonathan moves closer and blows the smoke slowly into her mouth. She breathes in deeply, and it enters her lungs much easier than when she tried on her own. She closes her eyes and holds the smoke for as long as she can, slowly exhaling when she starts to feel a cough coming on. When she opens her eyes, she's looking directly at Jonathan, who hasn't moved away from her. He raises his eyebrows, and she smiles in return. "Again," he asks. "Again," she responds.

This time, Jonathan doesn't need to nod to let her know he's ready. Instead, she watches him closely and when he turns to her, she meets

his mouth with hers, letting her kiss envelop the smoke. When she breaks away from him, he's looking at her with heavy-lidded eyes, and she knows exactly what he wants. When she finally exhales, she moves in for a more kiss, entwining her hands at the back of his neck to pull him closer. He eagerly responds, opening his mouth to deepen the kiss.

"Um, guys, if this is what you wanted to do, I simply could have left the pot on the front porch," Steve says from his corner of the couch, startling them out of their ministrations

"Sorry, Steve. I guess we got a bit carried away. Here you go," Jonathan says as he hands Steve the joint.

"Thanks," Steve responds, lighting the joint and taking a deep inhale. Steve and Jonathan pass the joint between them a few more times before it burns out, Jonathan taking a hit or two for himself in between hits for Nancy.

"Wow. I don't think I've felt this relaxed in months," Nancy says moving herself firmly into Jonathan's side. He drapes his arm over her shoulder and pulls her even closer. She hears him humming along to the music.

"I told you that you'd be humming along soon," she laughs.

"Yeah, well, I blame the pot . . . and Steve," Jonathan says dryly.

"Blame? Shouldn't you be saying thank you for the weed and groovy tunes?"

"Fine, if I must, thank you, *Steve*, for the pot but not for the Seals and Croft."

"You are welcome, for both," Steve says, finally leaning back into the couch with Nancy and Jonathan.

"Hmm, this is nice," Nancy sighs. "Why haven't we done this before?"

"Well, I am a bit like a third wheel at times like these," Steve says. When Nancy turns to him with a shocked look on her face, he

continues, "That's not necessarily a bad thing, Nance. I like hanging out with both of you, you know that, but I also know that it was good for me to keep my distance. You both needed that."

"Fair enough," she says.

"Yeah, fair enough," Jonathan echoes. "Maybe now that I kicked Tommy's ass once and for all, we can do this more often. No need to worry about feeding the rumor mill."

"I don't care about the rumor mill," Nancy protests.

"I know that, Nancy, but sometimes we don't need to call any more attention to ourselves than we already do."

"Jonathan's right, Nance," Steve echoes. "I don't care what anyone says about me, but it does bother me to hear what's said about you and Byers, too. Sometimes it's best to leave it be. But I'm glad you called tonight."

"Me, too," says Jonathan. After sitting in silence for a moment or two, Jonathan sighs and says "Fuck. Will's got to be OK, right? He couldn't have gone through everything just to come back and have it all go bad again, right?"

"I don't know Jonathan, I really don't. It would be so unfair if this whole ordeal isn't over. Poor Will," she says.

Jonathan sighs again and maneuvers himself on the couch so that he's curled on the cushion with his head on Nancy's lap. Looking up at her, he reaches up and twists a stray bit of her hair around his finger. "Thank you," he says to her, pulling her down for a kiss.

"You're welcome, but I don't know what for," Nancy smiles down at him.

"For being here, for calling Steve, for being honest with me, all of it," he says, turning over and curling into a ball. Nancy gently brushes his hair back from his forehead, and Jonathan is asleep within minutes.

"Well, I guess your idea worked," Steve says.

"Yeah, it did. Thank you, Steve, I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"You're welcome. And as much as I hate to admit it, you two do make a good couple. There's just something about you—the way you are with each other. So comfortable together. I don't know. It was never like that with us, was it?"

"No, it wasn't. But that doesn't mean I didn't like being with you. Or that I didn't love you."

"Don't say that, Nancy. You didn't love me."

"I did, but just not in the way I love Jonathan. I know that must sound terrible, but it's true."

"I'll accept that, I guess," Steve says. "Want another joint?"

"No, I think I'm OK for now. But please don't go yet."

"OK. What should we do? Look adoringly at Byers while he sleeps soundly in your arms?"

"Ha ha," Nancy responds, although that's exactly what she does for the next few minutes. Finally breaking their comfortable silence, Nancy says quietly, "I just can't stop thinking about that slug that came out of Will. It was terrible, Steve. And now, all I keep seeing is the Upside Down again and the monster. I thought it was over."

"You know me, Nance, I'd rather forget that week last year than face my memory of it. I can't even imagine what it must be like to come face to face with it again. And Byers, man, he lost his brother once, I hope he doesn't lose him again."

"I don't think he'd survive it, Steve. Or if he did, he wouldn't be the same person. He still withdraws into himself when things get tough—the graffiti, his dad, Will—and I don't always know how to reach him when he does. And I can't lose him. It's all just so complicated," she sighs tiredly.

"I don't like complicated, but I'm here if you need me. I've missed you—as a friend. You brought out a different side of me, a better one,

and I like him, if I say so myself.”

“I like him, too,” Nancy responds, laughing. “And so does Jonathan, although it’s tough for him to admit it.”

They sit in silence again, listening to the music. After about 10 minutes, Steve notices that Nancy has dosed off, her hand draped protectively across Jonathan's chest. He figures that’s his cue to leave. After grabbing his coat, he tucks the pot into Nancy’s bag and heads out the front door, leaving Jonathan and Nancy sleeping soundly on the couch.

6. Upside Down

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, six chapters in, and we finally make it to the end of a single day! I'm hoping we'll have a few more answers about what's happening with Will and the Upside Down, soon; I'm still trying to figure a few things out. In the meantime, enjoy, and thanks, once again, to everyone for reading and for the kudos!

Nancy wakes from a sound sleep, shivering from a sudden chill. Disoriented, she looks around at her surroundings, but can't quite figure out where she is. It's clearly the Byers living room, but it's much darker than she remembers. Maybe Steve turned off the light when he left? But when did he even leave? Think, Wheeler, she says to herself, figuring she must be groggy from the pot they smoked earlier. The last thing she remembers is talking with Steve on Jonathan's couch, Jonathan sleeping soundly with his head on her lap. She must have dozed off. She sits up and turns to look for Jonathan, but he's not there. And that's when she notices it—the decaying vines surrounding her on what was once the Byers' couch, the white debris floating in the air.

As her eyes continue to adjust, she notices the same vines all over the living room. The walls have returned to the same state she found them in last November, a hastily painted alphabet on the wall directly above her head, a patched over hole in the front living room wall. "Jonathan," she calls. "Jonathan?"

There's no answer. She slowly gets up and looks for the bag she brought with her earlier in the evening, the one with the gun. It's gone. There's no light, no bag, no sign of another human. She's back in the Upside Down. She feels a scream welling up in her throat and decides to run, to find someone, anyone to help her. She runs out of the front door onto the lawn and that's when she sees it—the Demogorgon standing at the far end of the driveway, swaying as if being blown in the wind, long, lanky arms hanging by its side. It must have heard her calling for Jonathan. She turns and runs to the back of the house, into the woods, stumbling on the decaying vines

that cover all surfaces in this strange world.

She doesn't care how loud she's is, all she cares about is finding Jonathan. She calls out to him again, hoping he'll call back. But she doesn't hear anything except her own panicked breathing and footfalls on the decaying ground. She keeps running, looking for any sign of human life. And if she listens closely she can hear the monster running behind her, its strange purring sound following her at every turn.

"Jonathan," she calls again, more panicked than ever. For the first time since she woke up in this world, she think she hears another human voice. "Jonathan," she calls again. "Nancy," she hears faintly from her right. "Jonathan, it's me, I'm here," she calls back. "Where are you?"

"I'm here, Nancy, right here. I've got you," she hears Jonathan call back, his voice louder than before.

"I can't find you, Jonathan. Help me. Please help me."

She continues to run in the direction that she heard Jonathan's voice, and she can still hear the Demogorgon behind her, its footfalls louder than before.

"Nancy, Nancy! I'm here. Follow my voice. Please follow my voice," she hears Jonathan call again. And then she sees it—the hollowed out tree that she used as a doorway the last time she was in this terrifying world. "Jonathan, I'm coming," she calls and throws herself into the hole in the tree's trunk, crawling to where she thinks the doorway back to her own world will be. She can hear Jonathan calling her name over and over, but she keeps crawling forward with no end in sight. And she can hear the monster behind, getting closer.

"Jonathan," she sobs, overwhelmed by fear and the effort to escape. "Jonathan, I can't find you."

"I'm here, Nancy. I'm here," he calls again. She keeps moving, but there's nothing back a black void up in front of her. She stops for a second to catch her breath and looks down for the first time. The decaying vines have now been replaced by black slugs like the one

Will coughed up earlier that evening. They crawl over her hands and are starting to move up her arms. The scream she's been holding back since she first awoke wells up again in her chest, and she lets it free, drowning out all sounds except a ragged, high-pitched wail.

The next thing she knows, Nancy is being shaken. Hard. She refuses to open her eyes for fear of seeing the monster, but Jonathan's voice, closer now rouses her.

"Nancy, Nancy, please wake up. You're safe. I'm here, I'm here," she hears Jonathan saying over and over.

She finally opens her eyes and sees the Byers' living room as it was earlier in the evening, well-worn but comfortable furniture in a room with fresh paint and new wallpaper. Jonathan is standing above her, hands still gently shaking her shoulders and eyes filled with worry. When she's finally able to settle and hold his gaze, she starts sobbing all over again. It was a nightmare, only a nightmare she thinks and reaches up to pull Jonathan to her.

"Ssshh, sshh, it's OK. I've got you now. I'm here," he says over and over again as he takes her in his arms.

"Oh god, Jonathan. I was there. In the Upside Down, and I couldn't find you. I ran and ran, and it was there. The Demogorgon. It chased me into the tree, our tree, where you found me. But I couldn't find the way out. I could hear you, but I couldn't find the way out," she says, the sobs taking over her body once again. Jonathan pulls her onto his lap and rocks with her until the sobbing passes, whispering to her the whole time.

"I'm sorry," Nancy says she can finally manage a few words. "It was so real, Jonathan, So real."

"But you're here now. You're safe," he says. "I'd never leave you in there, you know that, right? I'd always find you."

Nancy simply nods her head and burrows deeper into Jonathan's lap, trying to erase any and all distance between them. He's always made her feel safe, comforted, but tonight it wasn't working as well as normal. Tonight, nothing was normal. Or at least normal for their

unusual reality.

“Do you think you could sleep here? Or do you want to go to my bed?”

“Let’s not leave the couch. I don’t want to go in the hall. Is that ok?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s fine.”

Jonathan maneuvers himself so that Nancy is once again cradled in the warmth of his body, his lanky arms and legs wrapped around her tightly. She tries to focus on his breathing, his heartbeat, anything monotonous to keep her brain from spiraling back into that horrifying world. She doesn’t truly fall asleep again, caught somewhere between exhaustion and the fear of closing her eyes, but she’s roused for her dazed state by Hopper before dawn.

“Hey kids,” Hops says as he quietly sheds his coat and hat by the door. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Don’t worry, you didn’t,” Jonathan says as he gently untangles himself from Nancy.

“We didn’t have a great night,” Nancy adds, sitting up and wrapping her arms across her middle

“Everything okay,” Hop asks.

“Yeah, it’s fine. I just had a really bad nightmare that I couldn’t shake. I don’t think either of us really slept after that,” Nancy says. Hop just nods his head in understanding.

“Well, I’ll get right to it. Will is doing better. He woke up a few hours ago and was pretty shocked to find himself in the lab with your mom. He’s pretty agitated, too, but he’s stable. He wants to see you, Jonathan. I’ll take you, but I need to get at least an hour of sleep. Can you wait for me to do that?”

“Sure. That’ll give me time to take a shower and pull some things together for Will.”

“Great.”

“Can I come, too,” Nancy asks shyly.

“I think it’s best you don’t right now, Nancy. I’m sorry. But we’ll keep you posted, I promise. We’ll drop you off at home on our way to the lab.”

“Oh, okay,” she says. Nancy isn’t happy about not being able to accompany Jonathan to the lab, but she figures this isn’t the time to make a fuss. It’s best simply to get through the next few hours. She and Jonathan gather their things and make their way into his room, leaving Hop in the chair with his feet propped up on the coffee table (next to the incense burner, funnily) and already snoring soundly.

While Jonathan showers, Nancy slips into the change of clothes that she brought and lies down on his bed. She slips on his headphones and hits play on the tape deck beside his bed, having no idea what she’ll hear. It’s David Bowie singing “Starman,” and she smiles in relief, as it’s one of her favorites. She had never listened to Bowie before Jonathan and was surprised to find out just how much she loved his music (making Jonathan pretty damn happy in the process).

As she waits for Jonathan, she tries not to think about anything that’s happened, focusing instead on the melody of the music, the minty smell of Jonathan lingering on the pillow. She closes her eyes and drifts off to sleep. She’s wakes up when the music stops and looks over to find Jonathan kneeling beside the bed, already dressed, his wet hair combed back out of his eyes.

“Sorry,” she says. “The music . . . it was nice,” she says, taking off the head phones.

“I know. I have good taste in music, remember,” he says, offering her one of his rare crooked smiles.

“I remember.”

Nancy doesn’t feel like rousing herself yet, so she turns on her side and watches Jonathan as he gathers himself. The manic energy he had last night has disappeared, replaced by something more controlled. He’s methodically picking up his room, matching albums to their covers, putting away the clothes that he’s thrown on the

floor, gathering the stacks of photos strewn across his desktop into neat piles. When it looks as if there's nothing left to pick up or straighten, he finally comes over to join her on the bed.

"So how rude would it be to wake up Hop now? I don't think I can wait much longer," Jonathan says.

"How long has it been?"

"About 45 minutes. I let you sleep for a bit, you looked so peaceful."

"Well, I think 45 minutes is a solid nap for the chief of police, don't you?"

"Sounds good to me," Jonathan says. He stands up and offers Nancy his hand. She takes it, and he pulls her into a tight hug. She relaxes into him and rests her head on his chest. He strokes her hair, stopping to massage her neck. "I'm sorry you can't come with me. I hate to leave you alone after that nightmare."

"I'll be okay. How about you?"

"I'll be fine. Just seeing Will will help, you know. It's the not knowing that's driving me insane."

"Well, this is the second time in 24 hours that I've caught you two in a potentially compromising situation," Hopper says, interrupting them.

"God, Hop, we were just hugging . . ." Jonathan starts before he's interrupted by Hopper. "I'm kidding. I was just trying to lighten the mood a bit, but I clearly failed. Are you two ready to go?"

"Sure," Jonathan says, grabbing his messenger bag and Nancy's overnight bag on the way out of his room. After putting Ziggy in his kennel out back, the three of them pile into the front seat of Hoppers' Bronco.

"You know there's a back seat, Nancy," Hopper says.

"I know, but I'd rather be up here with you and Jonathan."

“Have it your way.”

The three drive in silence to the Wheeler house. The weight of the questions hanging in the air—How’s Will? What’s wrong with him? Is the Demogorgon back?—is palpable. When they arrive, Jonathan steps out of the car with Nancy’s bag. Before getting out, Nancy turns to Hopper. “Please call me if anything is wrong. I’m not sure if Jonathan will, and I need to know what’s happening. I’m worried about him, Hop.”

“Which him? Jonathan or Will?”

“Both.”

Hopper nods in understanding. “I’ll keep you posted, I promise.”

With the promise made, Nancy joins Jonathan on the walk to her front door. When they reach the porch, he sets her bag on the steps and takes her left hand in his and runs his fingers over her scar. He then lifts her palm to his lips and gently kisses it

“Call me, please,” she says to him.

“I will,” Jonathan says in return.

“And be sure to put more ice on your eye today. It looks pretty bad,” she says, brushing her fingers lightly over the bruised skin.

“Okay. I’m sure my mom will freak out when she sees it in any case.”

“Yeah, probably.”

They simply stand and stare at each other not knowing quite what to do. For some reason, Nancy feels as if this is a significant moment for them, but can’t quite pin down why. He’s just going to the lab to see Will. He’ll be back.

Hopper honks the horn once, breaking them out of their trance.

Nancy leans up and kisses Jonathan on the cheek. “I love you.”

Jonathan looks down at her and smiles. “Me, too.” He then turns and

jogs to Hopper's Bronco not looking back once.

Nancy waits until the truck is out of site before going inside.

7. On the Hunt, Again

Notes for the Chapter:

It's been longer than I anticipated since I last posted--real life is keeping me busy--and I'm excited to keep the story moving forward. As always, thanks for the kudos! And please share comments, too. I'd love to hear what folks think and always appreciate advice and suggestions!

Enjoy!

When Nancy closes the door behind her, the house is eerily quiet. She realizes that she has no idea what time it is. She throws her bag down and heads into the kitchen and sees 6:11 glaring back at her from the clock on the stove. Everyone must still be asleep or just starting to rouse. She grabs a glass from the cupboard beside the sink and fills it with water. When she turns, Mike is standing on the other side of the kitchen island, and she immediately drops the glass on the floor. Luckily it was a plastic tumbler, and she doesn't need to worry about broken glass.

"Jesus, Mike, you scared me to death."

"So, what's going on?"

"Aren't you even going to apologize for scaring me?"

"Oh, sorry. What's going on," Mike says.

"I really don't know," Nancy says, grabbing a paper towel to clean the spilt water. "Hopper just dropped me off and took Jonathan to the lab. He said Will woke up and is okay, but he's really confused and agitated and wanted to see Jonathan. Hop promised to keep me posted."

"That's it," Mike asks, clearly frustrated.

"Yeah, that's it, and it doesn't make me happy either."

“So, are you going to school today?”

“I don’t think so. I didn’t get much sleep last night—don’t look like that, Mike, I had a nightmare, dumb ass,” Nancy says as Mike makes a grossed out face, and she can only imagine what he’s thinking she and Jonathan did. “And I know I won’t be able to concentrate anyway.”

“Does mom know?”

“Yeah, I told her last night. I think I’m going to go up to bed,” she says after dropping the paper towels into the garbage.

“You’ll let me know if you hear anything right?” Mike asks.

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” Nancy says as she makes her way upstairs. She hears her mom’s blow dryer and breathes a sigh of relief—it will be at least a half-hour until she emerges from her room to start the day. Nancy immediately closes her door, drops her bag, and collapses on her bed. She doesn’t really feel tired, just empty. As if her insides have been scooped out of her, leaving her cold and numb.

Rolling over, she stares at the ceiling, trying to figure out what to do with the hours ahead of her. The thought of waiting around all day for Jonathan or Hopper to call sounds so unbearable, she actually considers going to school simply to occupy her time. But the thought of seeing Tommy or Carol, making small talk with classmates, or thinking about chemistry causes her to immediately dismiss the idea. She decides it’s probably best for her to try to get some sleep, so she pops in the mixtape Jonathan made her ages ago. It always helps her sleep and makes her feel a bit closer to him. She does her best to focus on the music and loses herself for a moment, until she’s roused by her mom, who has just barged into her room.

“Nancy, what’s going on? Is everything okay?”

Nancy takes a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. She figures it’s best to be as honest with her mom as possible, but she doesn’t have the energy for a long talk. Keep it short and sweet, Wheeler, she thinks as she sits up and looks over to her mom.

"Everything's fine. Hopper came home to get Jonathan this morning, and they are both at the lab. They dropped me off at home."

"Well, you still have time to make it to school. You really should go—it will take your mind off of things."

"I didn't sleep very well last night—I had a terrible nightmare, and I'd really just like to stay home and get some sleep. I think I'll feel much better."

"Are you sure?"

"Mom, the school year is almost over, my grades are pretty much set at this point. I think it's fine."

"Okay, but I still want to talk to you about what happened."

"I know, but can I get some sleep first?"

"Sure, honey. Do you need anything? Tea? Cereal?"

"No, thanks, mom. I'll be OK."

"I'll stop up a bit later to see how you're doing," Karen says as she heads out the door and down the stairs, calling for Mike to get dressed as she shuts the door.

Nancy lies back down and tries to relax. She listens to an entire side of the mix tape, but she only becomes more agitated. Something just doesn't feel right—and not just the situation with Will. Everything just seems unsettled and uncertain. And the fact that Jonathan didn't look back at her as he left bothers her more than she wants to admit. She knows that he was anxious to get to Will, but he never leaves without a final wave or some type of acknowledgement. She sits up suddenly, throwing her feet over the side of the bed in frustration.

"Dammit," she says, getting up and heading to her bag. She pulls out the gun and sets it on her bedside table and then sits and stares at it for a while. She can't just sit here at home, but what can she do? Sneak into the lab? Go monster hunting alone? Wait, maybe she CAN go monster hunting on her own. Well, not really hunting, more like tracking. If Will has been coughing up these slugs or whatever they

are, maybe they're still alive somewhere. If he flushes them down the toilet or the sink, wouldn't they end up in the Hawkins water treatment plant? Maybe they're still there.

That's it.

Nancy opens up the drawer in her bedside table and pulls out the phonebook. She looks up the water treatment plant and finds the address. Ironically, it's actually not too far from the lab itself. If she remembers a lesson from one of her science classes from junior high correctly, the water is treated in a series of separate pools. Some might be outside, which may give her a chance to see if there's any sign of life. But the big question is what can she do if she finds something? How big will these things be? Are they like tadpoles and turn into frogs? Will they have started growing a head, legs, and arms like the Demogoron?

Since it's only her, and she can't plan for everything, especially since she can't carry more than a bag with supplies and, maybe, the baseball bat, she decides to make this a reconnaissance mission—see what she can find, but have a few items in case she sees something. And if she does find something, she and Jonathan can make a plan and deal with it together like they did last time. She figures the gun is still a good idea, and she can grab some type of poison that she could spray if she needs to. Her dad has a pretty decent supply of roach and ant spray in the garage. And she'll take the bat that she keeps at her bedside. It won't be the deadly weapon Jonathan created by hammering nails to its top, but it will have to do.

She empties her bag, transferring the gun to the backpack. At the bottom of her bag, she finds the rest of the pot that Steve brought over to Jonathan's last night. There's enough left for one joint, she guesses. She debates on whether she should throw it out or save it and decides to do the latter, shoving it to the back of her bedside table behind her diary and some old photos. She then changes into jeans and a lightweight long-sleeved shirt. Again, she figures its best to protect herself as much as possible, and who knows what she'll have to crawl through at the plant. She might get hot, but she'd rather be hot than scratched up. She then brushes her hair out and puts it back into a ponytail and waits for her family to leave for the day.

After she watches Mike disappear down the block on his bike and her mother and Holly start out for their daily errands, Nancy grabs her backpack and heads to the garage. She finds an especially nasty looking roach spray, drops it in her bag, along with some water and an apple, and heads out the door. It's a warm day. Nancy works up a sweat just a few blocks into her trek, and she thinks how much easier her life would be if she had her own car.

Despite the heat, she soon settles into a rhythm, and her body finally starts to let go of the tension she's been holding onto for the last 24 hours. 24 hours? It seems like a week has passed since she arrived at school yesterday and saw the word "slut" splayed across her locker. And now here she is, alone on a Friday morning walking to the outskirts of town to investigate the presence of otherworldly creatures. What in the hell does she even need to look for when she gets to the plant? Black slugs floating in the pools? Dead animals in the surrounding area? Holes in the trunks of trees? God, she wishes Jonathan was with her.

Jonathan. Thinking of him normally brings a smile to her face and butterflies to her stomach. But now, it makes her head ache and stomach hurt. Something has changed in the last 24 hours, but she can't quite figure out what. Despite the short time they've been an official couple, their relationship has felt more solid and intimate than any other she's had in her life. Not even her relationship with Barb had been like this. Barb knew everything about her, every secret, every hope and dream. But Jonathan knew all that and more. They had faced a monster together and came out alive on the other side. And somewhere, along the way, she fell in love with him, opened herself up to him in ways she'd never had with anyone.

Jonathan had seen through her from the start—called her bullshit about trying to be something she wasn't long before she figured it out for herself (although she still wouldn't admit that to him). And he brought that honesty to every part of their relationship. Except yesterday. The fight with Tommy seemed too easy, and why would he run away from her, not want to talk with her about his fight with Hopper? Add that to his outburst about being too focused on her instead of Will and his quick goodbye this morning, and Nancy was

left feeling miserable and confused. Jonathan's ability to retreat into himself and then surprise her with outbursts of emotion had been overwhelmingly attractive to her yesterday. Today, it confounded and upset her beyond belief.

Nancy looks up and takes in her surroundings. The town has given way to a rural Hawkins, the neighborhoods changing to the woods that surrounded the town. She realizes that she must be nearly to the water treatment plant, thinking how truly lost in thought she must have been to have walked so far in what seemed like a short time. Surveying the landscape, she hears something to her left. She turns to peer into the woods that line that side of the road and can't see anything. She starts to walk again, but there's even more commotion from her left than before. When she stops, it stops, when she starts again, it starts again. Based on her past experience with the Demogorgon, she figures that any type of monster from the Upside Down would have simply charged at her by now instead of playing hide and seek, but she's wary enough of the humans she knows to take some precautions. She lifts the baseball bat to her side and walks toward the woods.

As she approaches the brush, she hears the noise again, this time coming straight at her. She lifts the bat higher, readying herself to swing just as a familiar baseball bat barrels its way out of the woods directly in front of her.

"Dustin, you asshole," Nancy yells. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same thing. Aren't you supposed to be sleeping at home?"

"And aren't you supposed to be at school," she fires back at him. "Ok, Mike, Lucas, come out now. I know you're here."

Mike and Lucas noisily trudge their way out of the woods into the road with her and Dustin, looking as pissed off and confused as she feels.

"What's going on?" she asks the boys.

"We could ask you the same thing," Mike says, lifting himself to his full height and looking his sister directly in the eyes.

"I don't have time for this shit," Nancy says. "Let's get out of the middle of the road and figure this out." She pushes her way past Mike and heads to the edge of the woods. Turning around, she starts to talk, "I'm going to check out the water treatment plant, okay. I couldn't sit around all day waiting for Jonathan to call, so I decided to check out the one place those damn slugs may be," she says bluntly.

"Seriously?" Lucas asks.

"Seriously."

"We were doing the same thing," Mike says shocked. "We decided to skip school and try to find out if those slugs are still alive, too. Huh, I guess we think alike."

"The Wheeler geniuses" Nancy responds dryly. "Let's get going then, shall we?"

Nancy starts her journey again, and the boys fall in line behind her. Mike soon runs up to walk beside her. "What do you think we should be looking for?"

"I'm not sure. I figured any sign of life would tip us off. Something in the water or even dead rodents or burrows, anything that might resemble the presence of a predator."

"Wow, you've really thought about this," Mike says. "We hadn't gotten that far, just thought that this might be the place where those slugs would end up after being flushed down a toilet."

"Exactly," Nancy says, flashing a quick smile at her brother

They walk along in silence for a bit, listening to Dustin and Lucas bicker. "Why aren't you on your bikes?"

"We left them at school. We figured we may as well create some illusion that we're at school, and they're a pain in the ass to ride in the woods."

“Makes sense,” Nancy says.

“Hey, hey Mike. Take a look over there,” Dustin calls. Nancy and Mike both look to their right and see it, the Hawkins Lab. They all stop to stare at the fortress-like building.

Nancy has to fight her desire to run straight to the lab and to the Byers family inside, but she knows it would be an exercise in futility.

“Do you think she could be in there? El?” Mike asks softly.

Nancy looks at her brother and sees pain and longing in his eyes. It breaks her heart knowing how much he’s hurting over that odd girl. “I don’t know, Mike, I really don’t. But I know that today is not the day to find out,” she says, squeezing his shoulder gently.

“Let’s keep going, guys,” she says. Dustin and Lucas pick up the pace immediately, but Mike lingers just a bit longer before joining the group. They don’t have to walk much farther to make it to the plant, and are greeted with a long brick building and a series of round pools behind it. They decide to split up and walk the perimeter. Nancy starts out with Lucas, but she soon wanders off on her own. She sees nothing—no sign of life in the pools, no odd markings or burrows in the undergrowth, no sign of otherworldly predators, nothing unusual at all. After about 30 minutes of wandering in the heat, Nancy decides to call it a day. She’s tired and hungry, and she’s eager to know if there’s a message waiting for her at home.

“Hey, I’m going to head on back now, okay,” she calls to the boys. The three of them emerge from the surrounding woods. “Sure, Nance. Did you find anything?” Mike asks.

“Nothing. Want to head back with me?”

“No, we’re going to look a little while longer. I’ll see you at home.”

“Be careful,” Nancy calls over her shoulder and heads back out to the road.

After about 20 minutes into her walk, she hears a car coming her way. She steps to the side of the road and waits for it to pass her by. As it gets closer it starts to slow down, and she turns around

cautiously, nervous it might be Tommy and Carol. Once she catches a good look at the truck, she realizes that it's Hopper. He must see her, as he slows down more and pulls up right beside her.

"Want a ride?" he asks with a smile.

"Sure, that'd be great," she says, grateful for the relief from the heat, and gets into the Bronco

"You're not the only one," he says just as she notices Mike, Dustin, and Lucas in the back seat looking uncomfortable.

"Hey boys," she says, smiling at how miserable they look.

"I ran into them about a mile back, so I thought it would be a great time to have a chat," Hop explains.

"A chat?" Nancy asks.

"Yep. One about Will, and I think we've all come to an understanding," Hop says, looking back at the boys. Nancy doesn't need to turn around to see the uncomfortable looks on the boys' faces; she can feel their nervousness rolling off of them.

"I think they'll be sure to keep me posted if any odd slugs turn up again. Right, guys?"

"Right," the three of them say dejectedly.

"Chief, you promised you'd give us an update on Will," Dustin calls from the back.

"That I did," Hop says. "Well, here's what I know. He's better than he was last night. It doesn't seem like the seizure caused any lasting damage. But they do want to keep him for a few days to take some x-rays and figure out what's going on with those slugs."

"Please tell me you haven't left him alone there. Who knows what type of tests they're going to do to him. I mean, look what they did to 11," Lucas chimes in. Nancy immediately looks back at her brother, who seems outwardly calm, but the strained look in his eyes tell her that he's struggling to hold himself together. There's a beat or two as

the realization of what he just said hits Lucas, and Hopper takes the opportunity to jump back into the conversation.

“What do you think I am, stupid? Joyce . . . I mean, Mrs. Byers refuses to leave his side, and Jonathan is there now, too. I don’t think the Byers family is going to be separated again if they can help it.”

“Good,” Lucas says.

“So you think it’ll be a few more days?” Nancy asks Hop.

“I hope so. I hate leaving them in that place, but it really is our only option right now.”

They drive on in silence for a few minutes until Hop asks them what they were all out doing on that country road with backpacks and baseball bats.

“Oh, we all were worried about the slugs,” Nancy says. Before she can go on, Mike cuts in, “Figured if they were still alive, they’d be some where near the water treatment plant.” Nancy cuts back in, “That is if Will was flushing them all down the sink or toilet.”

“That’s pretty good detective work, kids,” Hop says. “So I took the slug to the lab with us, and we watched it for that entire first day. It was dead within 12 hours or so. The lab folks didn’t think that they can survive in our world for long—the atmosphere or something. I don’t think we need to worry about those things turning into monsters.”

“Are they sure?” Nancy asks cautiously.

“I actually trust them on this one. I don’t think they want to deal with another monster either. And, if all goes well, I may be able to take you to see Will soon, too,” Hop says, looking at the boys through the rearview mirror. “No promises, but I’ll see what I can work out. They kinda owe me a favor.”

With that announcement, the boys start to talk among themselves, excited about the possibility of seeing Will. Nancy smiles to herself as she listens to their banter in the back seat and runs her hand in the breeze out of her window.

“Jonathan got a good lecture from his mom about that black eye of his,” Hop says. “Of course, it was followed by a long hug and lots of fussing, but I think Jonathan got the message.”

“Good. He deserved it.”

“And I got a long lecture on my behavior yesterday. Neither your or Jonathan deserved that treatment. I was out of line,” Hop says looking directly at Nancy.

“Good. You deserved it, too,” looking over at him. She holds his eyes for a beat and then starts to laugh, adding, “Thanks, Chief. I appreciate it.”

Hopper smiles and nods in acknowledgement. “Will really perked up once Jonathan arrived. He was listening to a mix tape that Jonathan made him when I left. Their two heads bobbing in time to some song I didn’t recognize.”

A picture of the two Byers brothers lost in the beat of a song comes easily into her mind, and she smiles to herself. They are so alike in so many ways, she thinks, including hiding. Her smile fades.

“Nancy, I’ve known Joyce a long time, since we were kids. And Jonathan reminds me a lot of her,” Hop says, breaking her train of thought. “I wasn’t wrong when I said that he’s like Lonnie, but there’s Joyce in him too. He’s not as outgoing as she is, but he’s got her, I know, depth. Sometimes she opens up and the whole world lights up but then, just as quickly, she retreats back into herself. It’s like she’s always hiding something that I want to find.”

“I was just thinking that Jonathan is just as good at hiding as he says Will is. It must run in the family, huh.”

“Yeah, I think it does,” Hop says. “I guess what I’m trying to say is I think I know how you’re feeling. Jonathan’s had some tough times, and I think he grew up faster than most kids his age, but I see how much he likes you. And I’m pretty sure you feel the same way about him. Just give him some time.”

How odd, she thinks, to be getting love advice from Chief Jim

Hopper. Can her life get any weirder? “Um, thanks for the advice, Chief,” she finally says.

“Sure,” Hop says, adding ironically, “that’s what I’m known for, my advice.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. I think there’s more to you than you let on,” Nancy responds, bringing a smile to Hopper’s face even as he looks away from her.

They don’t talk on the final bit of the drive, listening to the boys continue their bantering instead. He drops the trio at the middle school so they can pick up their bikes and takes Nancy on home.

“I’m going to head into the station for a bit and then back to the lab. I’ll be sure to tell Jonathan you said hello.”

“Thanks—for everything,” Nancy says as she gets out of the car. She waves as he pulls away, and he nods his head in return.

Nancy is greeted by her mom when she walks in the front door. “Where have you been, Nancy Wheeler? And don’t lie to me.”

“I went on a long walk,” she says. No need to tell any lies today, there’s really no point anymore. “I couldn’t sleep and needed some air. Chief Hopper ran into me and drove me home. I’m sorry to worry you.”

She waits a beat or two before asking, “Any messages?”

“No, Jonathan hasn’t called yet.”

“Oh, okay, thanks,” Nancy says, trying hard not to hide her disappointment.

“Why don’t you come into the kitchen with me. I need to get dinner started, and Holly could use some time with her big sister.”

“That actually sounds great, mom,” Nancy says and means it. She can’t remember the last time she spent some quality time with her baby sister, and the prospect of making Holly laugh sounds

surprisingly comforting. Now that she knows Will is okay for the moment and that those slugs haven't survived, she feels more at ease. And she's sure she'll hear from Jonathan soon.

"Let me go up and change, then I'll be right down," she says as she runs up the stairs, feeling lighter than she did just a few short hours ago.

8. Lost Chances

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, a second chapter in less than a week! I'm a bit amazed I was able to pull this together so quickly. I hope I can keep it up! I think I was inspired by Jonathan's return (not necessarily happy, but a return all the same).

For those who haven't read my first story, All of You, you may want to check it out right here on AO3. There are a number of references to it in this chapter, and I think it will help the story make a bit more sense (I swear, this isn't meant to be a shameless plug).

OK, on to the story, and, as always, enjoy!

Nancy doesn't hear from Jonathan the entire weekend. He doesn't stop by or even send a message through Hopper. Nancy occupies her time with homework and mundane chores, movies with her parents and story times with her sister. Anything to make the hours pass more quickly and to stop herself from worrying about Will and thinking about Jonathan. By Sunday night, she's at her wits end, pacing in the kitchen, randomly opening cupboard doors looking for who knows what.

"Nancy, what happened to your shirt?" her mother calls from the basement.

Nancy appreciates the opportunity to distract herself, if only for a moment, and heads down to the basement.

"It's ripped up at the collar," Karen says showing her the offending shirt. "Did you catch it on something?"

"What? No, I'm not that clumsy, mom," Nancy says grabbing the shirt from her mother. When she takes a closer look, she realizes it's the shirt she wore last Thursday. The shirt that Jonathan ripped in a

moment of passion. All of the frustrations and hurt that she's been holding back the entire weekend come flooding out of her at once, and she lets out a loud sob as she buries her face in the shirt.

"Nancy? Nancy, honey, what's going on? Are you okay," Karen asks concerned.

"Oh, mom, Jonathan ripped this," she says sobbing.

"Are you mad at him for ripping it? Is that what's wrong?"

"No, mom. He ripped it the last time we, um, we were together," she says, a blush rising up her cheeks. "And he hasn't called all weekend, and I don't know what's going on, if Will is okay, or if Jonathan's eye is getting better. I don't know anything," she cries, the tone of her voice rising higher and higher the longer she speaks.

Karen pulls Nancy into a hug, gently stroking her daughter's hair as Nancy sobs into her shoulder and lets her cry.

Nancy is surprised by how good it feels to let herself be mothered. She can't remember the last time she let her mom hug her, let alone stroke her hair. And the realization makes her cry even more. After a good five minutes, Nancy calms down enough to pull herself together.

"I'm sorry, mom. I'm just really upset that Jonathan hasn't called, and the shirt just reminded me of how much has changed over the last few days."

"What's changed? I understand that Will is sick, but what does that have to do with your relationship with Jonathan?"

"Something's different, I know it," she says and proceeds to tell her mother more than she's shared with her in months. "He still blames himself for Will's disappearance last year, thinks that if he would have been home instead of at work that Will would have been safe. And he now blames himself for not noticing how sick Will really was."

"That's ridiculous. How is any of this his fault?"

"Well, he said that he should have been paying more attention to Will and less attention to me," Nancy says quietly, tears coming to her eyes again.

"You're kidding me," Karen says, clearly annoyed.

"Mom, he apologized for it later. I don't think he really meant it, but it still hurt. A lot. And now, he hasn't called, and I don't know what to do. And I haven't been able to sleep without him."

The look on her mother's face makes Nancy realize what she just admitted to her mother, but she's too far gone to even care.

"Sleep without him," her mother repeats, eyeing her suspiciously. "You mean, you talk each other to sleep at night, right?"

"No, mom, I mean sleep," Nancy says, figuring she's all in on this honesty thing. "He spends most of his nights here, with me. It's not what you think, mom," Nancy says quickly seeing the panic start to settle on her mother's face. "I've had terrible nightmares even since last fall, since Barb disappeared. Jonathan is the only person makes me feel safe or helps keep them away. I can't explain it, mom, it just is. And the past few nights without him have been terrible."

"Honey, you're not without him. It's just been a few days. I'm sure it's okay."

"I don't know. I have a bad feeling about this thing. It just doesn't feel right."

"Well, let's not give up on him yet."

Nancy nods, wiping her eyes.

"I'm glad you were honest with me, Nancy, but I'm not happy about what you told me about him sleeping over. We'll deal with that once things get back to normal," Karen says, brushing the hair back from Nancy's face.

"Okay," Nancy says as she heads back up the basement stairs.

Just as she reaches the top of the stairs, her mom calls out to her

again. Nancy turns to find her at the bottom of the stairs. “Just to be clear—Jonathan Byers has been spending most nights in our house for the last few months.”

Nancy nods.

“Does Joyce know about this?”

“I think so,” Nancy shrugs.

Karen turns, a look of disbelief on her face.

Nancy tries to sleep that night, but finds it impossible. After being plagued by yet another nightmare of the Demogorgon chasing her through a sickly gray forest, she gets out of bed and grabs the baseball bat and gun. She settles herself back into bed surrounded by the weapons that don’t make her feel any safer, just more prepared should anything happen. After another sleepless hour goes by, she picks up her phone and calls Jonathan, letting it ring once before hanging up—her sign that she needs him to come over. She then waits. After about 20 minutes, she gives up on waiting and picks up the phone again, this time letting it ring at least a dozen times. No answer. She tries again in another half hour before giving up. She doesn’t sleep the rest of the night.

She heads to school on Monday morning hoping, but seriously doubting, that Jonathan will make an appearance. She only missed one day of school last week, but it feels like weeks have passed since she was last at Hawkins High School. When she arrives at her locker, the first thing she notices is that the graffiti is gone. She is normally the one to remove the slurs that frequently grace her locker, and she wonders who might have taken up the task in her absence.

Nancy fakes her way through the morning, trying her best to keep up a normal appearance, all the while growing more and more despondent as the day passes. At lunch, she goes to library, where she can read in peace and avoid the majority of her classmates. She’s pretending to be lost in a book when she hears “God, Wheeler, you

look like shit.”

Looking up, she’s greeted by Steve’s goofy grin and gives up a small smile.

“I feel like shit,” she responds.

“Is everything okay? I noticed Jonathan isn’t here.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him or talked to him since Friday morning. Last I heard Will was okay, and I think Jonathan’s been with him all weekend. But that’s all I know.”

“He seriously hasn’t been in touch with you?”

“No. I’m thinking of taking myself to the Hawkins lab and demanding that they let me in.”

“That doesn’t sound like the greatest plan to me, Nance.”

“What else can I do? I thought about camping out at his house, but I can’t be alone there, not after everything that happened.”

“Want to meet up after school today? I can drive you over to his house or to the lab or wherever you want to go.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You look like you need some company.”

“That’d be great. Thanks, Steve.”

“No problem. I’ll see you by my car after school,” he says, stopping to kiss her on the top of her head before leaving for class.

Steve is waiting for her on the hood of his car when Nancy makes her way into the parking lot. She decides to join him on the hood, basking in the warm sun for a minute or two. They don’t speak, just spend a few minutes taking in the scene. As the Hawkins High population wanders to their cars or starts their treks home, they can’t help but whisper and point at the two of them. Why would poor

Steve Harrington be sitting with his slutty ex-girlfriend? And where is that weirdo Byers? What can possibly be going on?

Realizing just how ridiculous this situation truly is, Nancy starts to laugh to herself.

“What?” Steve asks.

“Just look at everyone—we’re like a soap opera to them. They probably think you beat up Jonathan in a fit of rage, and I came running back into your arms. You’re a real saint, Steve,” Nancy says starting to full on giggle. She can’t stop herself—her giggle turns into a laugh, which turns into a guffaw, which only causes more classmates to look and point.

“Come on, Wheeler,” Steve says hopping off the hood, “let’s go.”

Nancy slides down and gets into the passenger seat, laughing the entire time. She thinks she may very well be coming unhinged.

“Where to?”

“Um, let’s head to his house first. Maybe he’s home or his mom. They need to let Ziggy out at some point,” Nancy says, finally able to bring the laughing under control.

Steve turns on some Journey as he heads out of the parking lot. “God, Jonathan hates Journey, says Steve Perry’s voice drives him insane,” Nancy says.

“Yeah, well I hate most of the shit Jonathan listens to, so I guess we’re even.”

Nancy laughs again, which feels good despite how shitty she feels otherwise, and leans back into the leather seats of the BMW, enjoying the smooth ride.

When they get to Jonathan’s, Steve parks behind Joyce’s car—Officer Callahan must have finally brought it back from the lake—and Nancy immediately jumps out and rushes to the door. Just as she’s about to knock, the door opens and Joyce Byers runs straight into Nancy, dropping a mess of items ranging from books to colored pencils to

cassette tapes.

“Oh my god, Nancy, you scared me to death,” Joyce says catching her breath.

“I’m so sorry, I had no idea you were home,” Nancy says, kneeling down to help Joyce pick up the mess.

“It’s okay. I just came home quickly to pick up a few things for Will. He’s going a bit insane in there. I think we all are.”

“How is Will?” Nancy asks.

“He had surgery yesterday,” Joyce starts.

“Surgery?”

“It’s okay, Nancy. The surgery went well, and he woke up this morning looking the worse for wear but alive.”

“Oh good. How long before they know if he’ll be okay?”

“I’m not sure. We’re hoping soon. Oh, hi, Steve,” Joyce says finally noticing Steve.

“Hi, Mrs. Byers. Will okay?”

“We hope so,” Joyce says, gathering her things and looking over to her car. “Steve, can I ask you to move your car? I can’t get out otherwise.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” Steve says, running back to his BMW.

“I’m sorry to run off so quickly, Nancy, but I need to get back. It was good seeing you. I’ll be sure to tell the boys you said hello,” Joyce says.

“Okay, um, please tell Jonathan to call me when he can. I’d like to talk to him.”

“Of course,” Joyce says, patting her arm before she opens the door to her car and throws in the notebooks and tapes.

Nancy waves as she watches Joyce back out of the driveway and turn around, feeling even worse than before. Surgery? Will had surgery? Why didn't Jonathan call her? She can only imagine how nervous he must have been during the procedure. She wished she could have been there for him.

"Hey, you okay?" Steve calls from the car.

Nancy doesn't answer as she gets into the BMW. Steve waits for her to get settled before heading out of the driveway.

"Can you take me home, Steve?"

"Are you sure? Did something happen?"

"I just really want to be alone. Joyce told me Will had surgery and that he's okay. That's it. No word on Jonathan, no 'he misses you' or 'he'll call you soon.' Nothing."

Before she can stop herself, Nancy starts to cry all over again. "I'm so relieved that Will is doing well, but something is wrong, Steve. This isn't like Jonathan. I've spoken to him nearly every day for the last six months. Why wouldn't he call me now?"

"I don't know, Nance. Maybe it's really crazy there, and they aren't letting them call. I can't imagine he doesn't want to talk to you."

Nancy doesn't answer him and looks out the window instead, trying to imagine what Jonathan must be feeling right now. He must be terrified of losing Will again. Maybe he's trying to make up for what he thinks is lost time or time that may be gone soon. She can't really be upset with him when she thinks about it like that, but it doesn't make it hurt any less.

When they make it to the Wheeler house, Steve turns off the car. "I'm worried about you, Nancy. I know that you're hurt, but it's really only been a few days. Give him the benefit of the doubt, okay. Byers is crazy about you, and you don't shake that in a day or two."

After a quick goodbye, Nancy makes a beeline straight to her room. Steve's right, she should give Jonathan the benefit of the doubt. It won't be easy, but she'll try.

Friday morning comes around, and Nancy still hasn't heard anything from Jonathan. She's called every night to no avail. Hopper fulfilled his promise to the boys and took them to see Will. She found out after they had gotten back (Hopper took them out of school so as not to worry any parents and then made them promise not to tell anyone; Mike, however, couldn't resist telling his sister). There were excited that their friend seemed to be doing well and full of even more nefarious government plots.

Furious, she tracked down Hopper to see if he would talk to her or give her any clues. He apologized, saying that he only had permission for the boys to visit Will and then reiterated what Joyce had told her. She was relieved that Will was better, but she grew more and more furious with Jonathan time passed. She had opened herself up to him, only to be repaid with silence and doubt.

Arriving at school, she follows her normal routine, heading to her locker to gather her books for the morning and taking a few moments to pull herself together. When she heads down the hall to her first-hour class, she sees him. Jonathan quietly slips in the main doors of the building, quickly maneuvering himself between his classmates. She waits in the middle of the hall for him to see her, and when he finally looks up and catches her eye, he stops as well.

The first thing she notices about him is that his black eye has faded from a nasty shade of purple to shades of yellow and green, and his eyelid is no longer swollen shut. The second is how tired and haggard he looks. She hasn't seen him look this strung out since last November. And the third is the pain she sees in his eyes as he looks at her. Neither she nor Jonathan make a move toward the other, locked in each other's gaze.

He finally breaks their connection, puts his head down, and continues his silent trip to class. Nancy releases the breath she's been holding and that's when the shaking starts. She can't tell if it's from anger or nerves or what, but she feels tremors making their way through her entire body. Instead of heading to class, she goes straight to the bathroom, locking herself into a stall until she can get herself under control.

Once the tremors pass, she becomes eerily calm. She knows he'll avoid her as much as he can, but she doesn't plan to make that easy for him. She'll adjust her routes to match his, seek him out at lunch, but she won't make a move to talk to him. That's his job.

He catches her eye each time their paths cross, but he immediately looks away. As the day goes on, he looks worse and worse, almost growing smaller before her eyes. But he refuses to talk with her, instead skulking past her or around her on his way to his next destination. He disappears at lunch, so she heads to the library once again and thinks about what to do. She figures he'll stop by the dark room after school—she knows he had a series of photos drying in there last week, and he'll be anxious to get them back. He never likes leaving his work out for others to see. She decides she'll try to find him there after school, force him into acknowledging her.

The last hour of the day drags on interminably. Per usual, Jonathan is the last person to make it to their English class, and he tries to be the first to leave, but he's stopped by Mrs. White, who asks about his absence and wants to talk with him about making up work before the end of the year. He won't glance at Nancy as she walks directly behind him, nearly brushing herself against his back. She can feel the tension coming off of him in waves.

She heads straight to the dark room, not even stopping to drop her books in her locker, and waits for him outside the door. About 10 minutes pass before she sees him heading down the hall. His head is down for most of the walk, but he looks up about 10 feet from the door, sees her, and stops. It's all she can do to keep her head up and hold his gaze. After a moment or two, he takes a deep breath and continues to the darkroom.

"Hey," he finally says when he reaches her.

"Hey," she replies, doing her best to erase any emotion from her voice.

As he digs in his bag for his keys, she has a moment to collect herself. She's been running through all the things she can say to him for the last hour, but her mind is suddenly blank, and she hopes that he'll start the conversation. Once he finds the keys, he unlocks the door

and holds it open for her. She walks by him, brushing his shoulder as she passes, and she can feel him jump, which brings her a small moment of satisfaction.

She walks into the darkened room and waits a moment for her eyes to adjust. She doesn't look at Jonathan, instead walks over the pictures hanging from the drying rack on the wall. She was right—they are his, a series of landscapes from around Hawkins. She was with him the day he took them. They drove around to their favorite spots, and he captured the details that they loved—a tree limb hanging over the water at the Hawkins lake, a small prairie in the middle of the woods behind his house, the giant, neon cowboy hat that stood in front of their local burger joint. It was one of her favorite days in recent memory and looking at the photos only filled her with sadness and longing. What if that was their one day and they don't get another? It just doesn't seem fair.

Before she turns back to him, a particular photo catches her eye. She sets her books down and pulls it off of the drying rack to take a closer look. It is a photo of her taking from behind. She's walking through the prairie, looking into the sky, sunlight reflecting off of her hair. It's a beautiful photo, one she doesn't remember him taking.

"What happened, Jonathan?" she asks him.

"What do you mean?" he asks in turn.

"These were taken only a few weeks ago. It was a great day—we were so happy. What happened?"

"Come on, Nancy, you know what happened with Will. Things changed once we knew how sick he was."

"Yeah, things changed with Will, but what about us? Why did we have to change? You haven't called me or reached out to me in any way. That's not how you treat someone you love."

"What would we know about that? Look at the examples our parents set," he responds bitterly.

"That's such bullshit, and you know it. This isn't about our parents,

it's about us. It wasn't that long ago that we stood in this very room, and you asked me to choose between you and Steve. Remember that? I'm pretty sure you did that because you loved me, and I chose you because I loved you. How has that changed so quickly?"

Jonathan remains silent, trying his best to avoid looking her in the eyes.

"I've spent the last week trying to give you the benefit of the doubt, imagining what it must be like to be in that lab not knowing what's wrong with Will or if he'll ever get better. And thinking how difficult it must be. But I could never understand why you wouldn't want to talk to me about it. I know that when I'm scared or upset or happy, you're the person I want to go to first. Why don't you feel the same way about me?"

"That's not fair, Nancy."

"Again, such bullshit. What are you not telling me? You've kept me in the dark over this whole thing, and I'm tired of it. I deserve to know what happened and why you're ignoring me like this."

It takes a few minutes for Jonathan to answer.

"It's Will. It's pretty bad. The doctors at the lab found what they think were eggs in his stomach. Mom told me that she and Hopper had to pull out some sort of vine or something out of his throat when they got him, and we think that it must have been alive, using Will as some sort of incubator."

"Oh god," Nancy cuts in, feeling nauseous just thinking about it.

"They think the coughing and seizures must have been the result of the eggs growing and then the slugs hatching. They did surgery to remove what they could, and they think they got everything. But it was pretty extensive—they had to go into his abdomen, which can be pretty dangerous. He's doing much better, but we need to keep him there for observations for a while."

"Okay. And why are you back now?"

"Well, he's finally stable enough that I felt safe leaving him. I didn't

want to not be there if something happened. I couldn't live with myself," he says quietly.

Nancy wants to reach out and take him into her arms, try to help him find some comfort, but he still hasn't talked about them. "Thanks for explaining about Will, but what about us? How can we go from where we were on Thursday to this?"

She can see him struggling to find a way to answer. "Please, Jonathan, I need to understand."

"I just needed to be with Will, Nancy. Don't you understand? What if I lost him again? I didn't want to be away from him this week."

"Then why didn't you tell me that? A simple phone call would have been enough,"

"I don't know," he says, defeated "I'm just tired, Nancy. Tired of fighting the rumors, tired of fighting the Upside Down, just tired."

"Tired of us?"

"No, not that."

"Then why cut me out of your life?"

"I didn't cut you . . ."

"Yeah, you did," Nancy breaks in. "Do you love me, Jonathan?"

"What does that matter? We both know loving someone doesn't stop bad things from happening or make things work out in the end." It's the most emotional she's seen him so far.

"Do you love me, Jonathan?" she asks again, more forcefully.

He looks at her pleadingly, almost asking her to not make him answer the questions. And that's when she knows, this is over.

"I think I know the answer, Jonathan. Thanks for finally making that clear," she turns from him, picks up her books, and starts to walk out the door. As she passes him, she hands him the photo he took of her.

“You know I told you that I at least wanted the chance to love you. The thing is, I never thought that chance would pass by so quickly. Good bye, Jonathan.”

Nancy walks out the door of the darkroom before he can respond and turns immediately into the closest restroom, where she finally breaks down.

9. For Barb

Notes for the Chapter:

Yes, this chapter is for Barb! I didn't think I would have the opportunity to address Nancy's mourning for Barb in this story, but the opportunity presented itself, and I ran with it. I hope it brings some satisfaction to Barb fans out there.

I think I've got a couple of chapters left--the end is finally revealing itself to me. That said, thanks for the recent comments and likes--I can't tell you how much I appreciate them. Please keep them coming!

And, as always, Enjoy!

When Nancy arrives home after leaving school—and Jonathan—she ignores her mother's calls from the dining room and goes straight to her room, where she remains all night and the majority of the next day. Her mother tries to reach her, knocking on her door, offering Nancy her favorite foods, threatening to ground her if she doesn't open the door this instant; her father even comes upstairs to plead with her to open her door. Nancy can't remember the last time her father spoke to her directly, let alone come within inches of her bedroom.

It isn't until Mike knocks on her door Saturday afternoon that Nancy finally gives in. "Please, Nancy, I'm worried about you," Mike whispers from the other side of the door, and when she hears the sadness in his voice, she can't shut him out any longer.

Nancy gets off her bed for the first time in hours—she honestly can't remember the last time she went to the bathroom or did, well, anything other than stare at her ceiling—and opens the door for Mike, immediately returning to her bed. Mike follows her into her room, shutting the door behind him. He sits down on the floor beside her bed.

"Are you okay?" he asks, looking up at her.

"I don't know," she responds, honestly.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No. I think I need to take a shower more than anything else."

"Yeah, you look like shit."

"Mike," she says throwing a pillow on her little brother, making him giggle.

"Well, it's true," he says laughing. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I don't. I just want to, I don't know, forget about everything for a while," she says. They sit together in silence for a few minutes.

"Do you ever want to go back in time?" Mike finally asks.

"What do you mean, Mike?"

"I don't know, go back to before Will, before he was taken."

Nancy thinks for a minute before finally responding.

"When school started this year, I was so excited. It was my junior year, and Barb. . .," she stops, letting out a small sigh before continuing, "Barb and I had so many plans for the year. We had a checklist, you know—ace our classes, see Duran Duran in concert, go to our first dance—stupid things like that. And I had just met Steve—I mean I knew who he was, but I didn't meet him until right after school started, at the first football game. I had dropped my sweater under the bleachers, so I went down to get it. He must have been smoking or something, and he met me, sweater in hand, just as I turned the corner. He was sweet and charming," she trails off. She looks down at Mike, and he's looking back at her, eyes wide, which she takes as a sign to go on.

"And then Will was taken, and then Barb. A few months ago, I had a best friend and a boyfriend, and studying for chemistry or buying the perfect shirt were all that mattered to me. And now, my best friend is gone. Steve and I, well, you know. And Jonathan. . .," she can't bring herself to elaborate. "And that doesn't even take into account the fact

that I entered another dimension and fought a real monster.”

“So, do you want to go back?” Mike asks again.

“No. I really don’t,” she says, surprising herself with her answer. “I’d rather know what I do now, have experienced all that I have, than go back.”

“Yeah, me, too,” he says, wiping his eyes. Nancy hasn’t even noticed that he’s been crying, and before she can even think about how Mike will respond, she leans down and pulls him into her arms. Surprisingly, he tightens the hug.

“I miss her,” he whispers into her shoulder. “I know,” she whispers back.

When they part a minute or two later, Nancy feels a bit lighter than she did earlier and recognizes an ally in her brother.

“Thanks, Mike.”

“For what?”

“For being here, for making me think.”

He shrugs in response, shedding his momentary vulnerability to become a 13 year-old boy once again.

“I think I’m going to shower now. Can you tell mom that I’ll be down for dinner?”

“Sure,” he says, heading out the door. She hears him yell “Mom, Nancy’s coming down for dinner!” on her way to the bathroom.

Nancy approaches the last week of school in the only way that she can—she keeps her head down, focuses on finals, and avoids Jonathan as much as possible. It works for the majority of the week—Jonathan is clearly avoiding her as much as she is him—until their English final. In the middle of the test, Nancy needs to sharpen her pencil. As she turns in her seat to get up, she catches Jonathan

staring at her, and he doesn't look away when he's caught. She recognizes the look in his eyes, it's one that she last saw the night Will got sick. She can feel the pace of her heart quicken and a warmth radiate out from her core to the tips of her toes and her ears in response. And she can see his own breath quicken in turn. Nancy freezes in the moment, unable to break his gaze or move.

"Nancy is there something you need from Jonathan?" Mrs. White calls out loudly, breaking them both out of their trance.

Nancy can feel a full-fledged blush begin to make its way up her neck and onto her cheeks, a twin to the one she sees spreading over Jonathan's neck and jaw, even though he's able to hide beneath the collar of his plaid shirt. "No, Mrs. White, I was just getting up to sharpen my pencil."

"Then I suggest you do just that and return promptly to your seat. And, Jonathan, is there anything you need?"

"Um, no, Mrs. White," he says in a voice barely audible above the movement of their classmates as they all turn to see what's happening

"Then please return to your test. And I'd recommend the same for the rest of the class," she says sternly looking over their classmates.

Nancy avoids looking at Jonathan on her way to the sharpener at the back of the room and returns promptly to her desk. She tries her best to focus her attention to her final, but it's nearly impossible. She can't shake the look he gave her or the feeling it inspired, and it leaves her more confused than ever. About 20 minutes later, Jonathan finishes his exam, nearly running out of the room as he drops it on Mrs. White's desk. Nancy takes the full exam time to finish.

She doesn't see him again that day or the next, the last day of the school year. After her last exam, she heads to her locker to clean it out for the summer. She carefully takes down the butterflies that she put up on the first day of school—they were identical to the ones Barb placed in her locker—and throws away pretty much everything else she finds beneath her books, except for a small stack of notes from Barb. She can't bear to part with these last connections to her

friend. With her locker clean and the notes and butterflies stored carefully in her purse, she shuts the metal door and walks out of Hawkins High, feeling as hollow as the locker she just left behind.

Sitting on the side of the pool while Holly splashes in the shallow end, Nancy thinks about the three long months of summer ahead of her. What is she going to do? She doesn't have Barb, and while she's made a couple of new friends, there's really no one with whom she wants to spend her free time. While she knows she can probably call Steve—she knows he'd gladly distract her from her troubles—she just doesn't feel like it, and it looks as if he's starting to make a move on a sophomore named Brenda Smith, so she doesn't want to burden him with her continuing presence. She was planning on spending her summer with Jonathan, long lazy days doing nothing but listening to music and seeing movies and enjoying each other. You know, all the things teenagers are supposed to do instead of fighting monsters from another dimension. But those plans aren't going to pan out either.

"Holly, don't splash the other kids. Just stick close to me, okay," Nancy calls to her sister, who responds by flailing herself back across the shallow end, covering Nancy in lukewarm pool water.

"Thanks, kiddo," Nancy says, kicking her foot to splash Holly in return, who erupts into giggles.

She's arranged to watch Holly 2-3 days a week to give her mom a break (and her some extra cash), but that still leaves her with a lot of free time. She plans on tutoring, like she normally does each summer, and she can study for the SAT and research colleges, but, again, she's left with a lot of time on her hands. Nancy sighs in frustration and looks around the pool to see if there's anyone she knows.

A familiar trio of preteen boys catches her eye, and she waves at them from across the pool. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas each jump into the pool, Dustin landing a huge cannonball, and flail their way over to Nancy and Holly. Nancy can't help but marvel at their antics. Despite what they've all seen and experienced, they've managed to maintain their innocence and playfulness. It really is astounding.

“Hey, Nancy, who are you here with?” Mike asks.

“Your sister, who you nearly ran over a second ago,” she says. Mike looks over to find Holly glaring at him from the side of the pool.

“Oh hey, Holly, I didn’t see you there,” he says to her sister as he scoops her up into his arms and throws her over to Dustin. Holly giggles as she lands in Dustin’s arms, hollering for more, more, more. Mike and Dustin continue to throw Holly back and forth between them.

“Did you hear that Will is coming home tomorrow morning” Lucas asks her.

“No, I didn’t. That’s great news,” she says.

“Yeah, we’ve already got a party planned. We’re going over tomorrow night—we figured that’s about as long as they can keep us away,” he says, smiling. “Mike has even started planning a D & D campaign to welcome him home. We figured we could set up camp at his place and let him rest when he needs to.”

“That sounds great, Lucas. Are you sure Joyce wants you over all night tomorrow?” Nancy asks.

“Jonathan helped us plan the party, so I think we’re good,” Lucas responds

“I thought that maybe you’d come over too,” Dustin adds.

“No, no, that’s OK. I’ve got my first tutoring appointment of the summer, and I can’t miss it. I’m sure I’ll see him soon,” she adds.

Nancy and Mike exchange a knowing look before he throws Holly back her way and tackles Dustin, wrestling him under water. Lucas jumps on top of the two of them, and they are lost in an epic pool battle. Nancy hops in the water, puts Holly on her back, and swims across the pool to the deep end where it’s quieter. She spends the next hour or so entertaining her sister and trying to keep thoughts of the Byers brothers at bay.

How Nancy found herself on the Byers' front porch, she'll never know. Somehow her mother had managed to get her to take over a casserole to celebrate Will's Homecoming—something about Holly not feeling well and her father working late. Nancy tried her best to get out of it, used every excuse in the book, including the fact that she didn't want to see Jonathan. But she lost out in the end, her mother essentially pushing her out of the door and into the car. The casserole itself was so large, Nancy couldn't protest without the risk of dropping the ceramic dish full of who knows what. Damn, Karen Wheeler was a force of nature, she thinks.

And now, here she is, standing on the front porch with a casserole about to interrupt the homecoming of her ex-boyfriend's little brother. There was nothing left to do but get this over with, so she rings the doorbell and braces herself in case Jonathan answers the door. Luckily, he doesn't.

Hey, Nancy," Hopper says a little too loudly as he opens the door. "Come on in."

"No, that's okay, Chief. My mom just wanted me to drop off this casserole. I really have to run—I've got a tutoring appointment in a few minutes," she lies

"Oh, come on in. I know Will would love to say hi," Hopper says, essentially pulling Nancy in the front door.

"I'll just drop this in the kitchen and run. My mom said there's instructions under the lid," Nancy says as she heads to the kitchen, setting the casserole on the stove. As she turns to leave, she sees Jonathan standing at the entrance to the kitchen, looking confused.

"My mom asked me to drop off a casserole. Holly was sick, and my dad was working late, and Mike was with the boys, so I was the only one who could come by. I'm really sorry. I'll go," she says quickly, looking anywhere but at him.

As she starts to head out of the kitchen, he reaches his arm out as to prevent her from leaving, but stops himself before actually touching her. "It's okay, Nancy. Will would appreciate seeing you."

"I need to go, Jonathan. Please tell him that I'll see him soon," she says rushing past him and out the front door. She doesn't stop until she's sitting in the driver's seat of her mom's car. She leans her head on the steering wheel and tries to catch her breath. After a minute or so, she starts the car, looks in the rear view mirror, and sees tears running down her cheeks. She had no idea she was crying. Did she start while she was still in the house? Or only in the car? She felt humiliated—the last she wanted was Jonathan to see her cry. As she wipes the tears away, something catches her eye. She looks back to the house and sees Jonathan at the door looking her way. He waves at her as she turns the car around and heads out the driveway. She doesn't look back.

Nancy is furious by the time she gets home. She really wants to grab the gun and shoot cans in the woods, but that only reminds her of Jonathan, which frustrates her even more. She decides to go for a walk instead. How did she let herself get manipulated by her mom and Hopper so easily? And why would Jonathan follow her out? What does he want from her? He can't ignore her for more than a week, give her no choice but to break up with him, essentially undress her with his eyes, and then this? Jesus Christ, she thinks, he's giving me whiplash!

She has no doubt that he still has feelings for her—what she can't figure out is whether it's love or lust. It was lust that got them into this situation in the first place, so it's not surprising that his desire for her may be driving his actions. But their relationship felt so real. And he never took advantage of her physically, not even after they started dating. She was with Steve for far less time before she had sex with him. The closest she and Jonathan ever got to sleeping together was the night Hopper walked in on them. And when she thinks of that night, before everything went wrong, she feels that same warmth begin to spread out from her center. But something changed that night, she knows it.

The Jonathan she fell in love with wasn't the same person who ignored her after Will got sick. Her Jonathan wasn't scared to fight—he'd fight monsters and assholes for those he loved. It doesn't make sense that he would give up on their relationship so easily, let her

break it off with him without more of a fight. But does she even want to find out why? Is it time to let him go?

“Dammit,” she says out loud, “I need Barb.”

Nancy is suddenly hit with a longing for her best friend so forceful that it literally brings her to her knees. Barb would know exactly what to say to her, what questions to ask her to help find the answers she so desperately needs. But Barb was gone, lost forever in the Upside Down. And no one outside of their small group knew, not even Barb’s parents. It was so unfair and so wrong. And she was helpless to do anything about it.

She stays on her knees for so long that her legs eventually fall asleep. She’s trying to maneuver herself to her feet when a hand suddenly appears in front of her face.

“Need some help, Ms. Wheeler,” says a familiar voice. Hopper.

“My feet are asleep,” she says grabbing his hand. Once he’s gotten her upright once again, she proceeds to hop from one foot to the other, trying to work out the pins and needles running up and down her legs.

“Once this little dance of yours is done, can you tell me what you were doing in the first place,” Hop says.

“Well, I was so pissed off that I let myself get manipulated by my mom and you (she thrusts her finger into his chest as she says this) into walking into the Byers’ house that I had to go for a walk. And then I thought about Barb and how much I missed her and I just sort of fell to my knees, I guess. And then my legs fell asleep,” she says looking up at him. He’s staring at her as if she’s gone nuts. “It’s been a bad few weeks, Hop, can you cut me some slack.”

“Whoa, whoa, I didn’t say a word. I’m just trying to wrap my head around the situation. Can I at least give you a ride home?”

“I think I’d rather walk,” she says. But just as she turns to head back home, she has an idea. “Hopper, hey Hopper,” she calls running over to his truck. “I think you owe me a favor.”

“Oh I do, huh. And why would that be?”

“Well, you never called to give me an update on Jonathan while he was at the lab, and then you took the boys to see Will and didn’t even bother to invite me. And, to top it all off, you nearly pushed me into the house tonight when it was pretty damn clear I didn’t want to be there. You do know that Jonathan and I aren’t together, right?”

“Ok, that’s a lot of accusations there, so give me a sec,” he says, rubbing his hand over his 5-o’clock shadow. “First, yes, I know you and Jonathan aren’t together. I don’t know what happened, but it’s pretty damn obvious by the way he’s been moping around lately. Second, no, I didn’t call you because he asked me not to. And since I treated him pretty shittily a few weeks ago, I decided to respect his wishes. And third, again, it was clear he was trying to keep his distance from you, so I didn’t take you to see Will. I’m sorry. I’m in a bit of a complicated situation here. And lastly, yes, I did coerce you into the house tonight because I think it’s ridiculous that you two aren’t together. It’s pretty damn clear how you feel about each other, and I thought seeing each other might help. Anything to stop the damn moping. But I still don’t get how I owe you any favors,” he finally ends.

“I think it’s pretty clear—you respected Jonathan’s wishes, now help me out with mine,” she responds.

“Well, what do you want?”

“Barb. She deserves—her family deserves—some closure. Can you help make that happen? If that lab can fake Will’s body, they can definitely fake one for Barb. I want to say goodbye to her, properly. I need to do this, Hopper. Please help me,” she says, proud of herself for keeping her emotions at bay.

Hopper doesn’t respond for a few minutes. Instead, he walks slowly around his Bronco, ringing his hat in his hands. When he comes back around to Nancy, he stops and simply nods his head once. “You’re right, she deserves to be mourned. I’ll see what I can do.”

He then puts his hat (worse for wear) back on and hops into the Bronco. “I’ll be in touch soon. In the meantime, please walk on home

and get some rest. You look like shit,” he says as he takes off.

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me,” she calls after him.

When Hopper stops by the Wheeler’s house asking for Nancy a couple of days later, she’s surprised to see him. She figured it would take him a lot longer to work something out. He explains that the lab was actually pretty open to bringing closure for all of those folks who went missing last year. The families of the missing hunters have started to get suspicious, so they’ve concocted some story about an animal attack. He said the lab plans to plant the hunters’ remains in a cave out in the woods and will do the same for Barb, but hers will be closer to Steve’s house. The story will be that the spring rains uncovered the evidence. He adds that he’s leaving the details up to the lab, but tells Nancy that she should expect a call from Barb’s parents soon.

After Hop finishes, Nancy throws her arms around his middle and squeezes tight. “Thank you” she says.

It takes a minute for Hop to return the hug—he’s a bit taken aback by the show of emotion—but he finally does. “You’re welcome,” he says. “I think this will help all of us. I hope we can finally say goodbye to the Upside Down.”

“Me, too,” Nancy responds finally breaking the hug.

It takes another week or so for anything to happen. Nancy divides her time watching Holly, tutoring the neighbor kids, researching colleges in the library, and thinking about Jonathan. She decides it’s better not to fight her emotions but simply accept them, otherwise it’s just too hard. She’s still unbelievably pissed off at him for giving up on them so easily, but she misses him more than she’s angry. She lost her best friend and her boyfriend, and it’s taking its toll on her. She hasn’t slept well, and she still looks like shit. No matter how much concealer she uses, the dark circles under her eyes are always visible, and her hair is in a perpetual pony tail.

When she receives a call from Barb’s mom after dinner one

Wednesday night, she's far more nervous to take the call than she expects to be.

"Hello," she says quietly.

"Nancy, honey, it's Mrs. Holland. They found Barb."

"What?"

"They found, Barb," Mrs. Holland says trying to hold back a sob. "She didn't run away. She was attacked by an animal. They found her body yesterday in the woods, along with the bodies of the two hunters who went missing as well. . . . Nancy, are you okay?"

Nancy had started sobbing at some point in the conversation, as much from relief as from sadness.

"I'm okay," she responds. "I'm just so, so sorry. I miss her so much."

"Me, too. Me, too," Mrs. Holland says, starting to cry herself. "Can you help us, Nancy? We want to plan the funeral, and we'd like you to be part of it. Can you do that for us?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Anything for Barb," she says.

"Okay. Can you come by our house tomorrow?"

"Of course. I'll see you soon," Nancy says before hanging up.

"Nancy, is everything okay?" her mother calls from the family room.

Nancy walks into the room, where her family is watching the evening news. "They found Barb," she says between tears. "They found Barb's remains," she says again and turns to head up to her room.

Nancy expects her mother to be the first one to visit her, but it's Mike instead. "Can I come in?" he asks.

"Sure," she says opening her door wider.

"Did you know?" he asks.

"Know what?"

“That she would be found.”

“Yeah. I asked Hopper to help me give her family—and me—some closure. And he did. I knew that she’d be found soon, I just didn’t know when.”

“What are they saying about it?”

“I don’t quite know yet. I think I’ll know more tomorrow.”

“How do you feel?”

“Sad but relieved. I can finally say goodbye to her,” she says starting to tear up again.

“Yeah. That’s good,” Mike says quietly and leaves her room. She knows he’s thinking about Eleven, but that’s a situation she knows she can’t help change.

Nancy cries herself to sleep that night, letting herself finally truly mourn for Barb. She’s not sure what time she falls asleep, but her mother wakes her up at some point in the middle of the night, shaking her out of her slumber.

“Nancy, honey, it’s okay. You’re okay,” her mother says as Nancy comes to.

“Mom? What happened?”

“You were talking in your sleep, sometimes screaming. I’ve been trying to wake you up for the past ten minutes. You must have been having a nightmare sweetheart,” Karen says, brushing her hair back off of her face.

“What was I saying? I don’t remember.”

“You were calling out for Barb at first and then Jonathan. You kept calling his name and saying you couldn’t find him. You sounded so scared, sweetie.”

"I'm sorry, mom. I didn't mean to wake you. You can go now, I'll be okay."

"Nancy, how often do you have nightmares like this?"

"I'm sure it's just finding Barb, mom, I'll be fine."

"No, I'm not going to let you push me away this time. How often do you have nightmares like this?"

Nancy takes her time trying to decide what to say. She told her mom about Jonathan staying the night, she may as well continue to be honest; she's really got nothing to lose.

"Nearly every night since Will's disappearance."

"Every night?" Karen says shocked.

"Almost, yeah. It's the reason Jonathan stays here with me. He helps keep the nightmares at bay, makes me feel safe. And he gets them, too."

"How come I've never heard you before? If you've been having them for so long, wouldn't I have heard you calling out at some point?"

"I don't know, mom. I normally wake myself up when I start to call out, before it gets bad. And then I'd call Jonathan. Since Will got sick, though, the nightmares have gotten worse. And without Jonathan, I'm having a hard time keeping them at bay."

"Can you tell me what they are about? I don't really know what happened last fall, Nancy. I know bits and pieces—some type of creature, a girl with special powers, Will being found, but none of it makes much sense to me. And Mike won't tell me anything. Please help me, I want to understand."

"Mom, it's such a long story. I really want to get some sleep."

"No, you're not going to do that," Karen says firmly. "I need to understand. I need to know why you get these nightmares, what happened to Barb, why Jonathan is here almost every night. I can't help you or even know how to react when you tell me these things if

I don't know. Please, Nancy."

Nancy sighs to herself. She's gone this far, she may as well tell her the truth. So sits up, gestures for her mom to sit across from her and begins. She recounts the entire week from last November. How Barb disappeared when she was with Steve, how she saw something the next day and Jonathan's picture. She told her about her trip to the Upside Down and how Jonathan saved her, about monster hunting and meeting Eleven and finding Will. And about what happened afterward, ending with Will getting sick a few weeks ago and breaking up with Jonathan. All of it.

Her mother is silent when she's done, and instead of saying anything, she takes Nancy in her arms and holds her until they both fell asleep.

10. Second Chances

Notes for the Chapter:

The end of this fic finally revealed itself to me, and we're almost there. I have to admit that this is one long chapter, starting with some closure for Barb and ending with some Jonathan. I hope you enjoy it all the same!

As always, many, many thanks for the kudos and comments!

The day of Barb's funeral is a perfect Indiana summer day—80 degrees, a slight breeze, and not a cloud in the sky. It's the kind of day that Barb loved. On days like this, she and Nancy would crawl out of Barb's window and sit on the roof of her front porch and watch the day go by, gossiping, reading, or sometimes stopping to sing their favorite song at the top of her lungs. Her neighbors would get annoyed, but the two of them didn't care.

Nancy smiles as she walks out of the house with her family, feeling the presence of her best friend with her. She is speaking at the memorial service, and they expect nearly the entire town to come out for the event. She's normally a nervous wreck when she's in front of crowds, but today, she feels calm and ready.

When the Wheelers arrive at the church for the memorial service, they are struck by the number of people who have already arrived. They are greeted by the Hollands, who, not surprisingly, seemed to have aged at least a decade over the last year. The two families enter the church together and are ushered into the sanctuary by a side door, allowing them to avoid most of the mourners. The service passes by in a blur for Nancy. Instead of listening to the minister or thinking about what she's going to say, she focuses on the picture of her best friend at the front of church and thinks of all of the things she loved most about her. Her dry sense of humor, her beautiful writing, her love of Jane Austen novels, her honesty. These are the things she'll carry with her forever, and she plans to share them with those here today.

When she's called to the front of the church, she takes a moment to look at the crowd. Hawkins is a small enough town that she recognizes most everyone here and is happy to see Steve and his parents (one of the rare times she's seen his parents together), Dustin and Lucas with their families, as well as Will, Joyce, and Hopper. She doesn't see Jonathan and scans the crowd a second time expecting to find him. When she doesn't see him again, she does her best to ignore the painful pang that she feels in her chest. She had assumed he would be here, and his absence hurts.

She takes a deep breath, and begins. She makes it through the speech without crying, even though Mrs. Holland is visibly shaken by Nancy's words. When she makes it back to the pew with her family, she is embraced by both of Barb's parents, as well as hers. She can see that they are proud of her in this moment, and she knows she succeeded in helping bring some closure to those who loved her best friend.

The Wheelers, plus a few close friends and family, attend the graveside service immediately following the memorial. The small group of mourners form a circle around Barb's grave, and as Nancy scans the crowd, she notices a familiar figure standing at the edge of the group—Jonathan. He's standing alone, although Chief Hopper is close by. They must have come together. He catches her eye for a second before looking away. The pain she felt at his earlier absence slowly starts to fade. Knowing Jonathan, it makes sense to her that he made himself visible here, where she would say goodbye once and for all to her best friend, and she's grateful for his presence. It's a short service, but it affects Nancy more than the earlier one. When she stops to throw her rose on Barb's casket, the tears finally start to fall, and she immediately looks up to find Jonathan. He's still standing at the edge of the crowd, his eyes fixed on hers.

After the service is over, she makes her way through the small crowd to find Jonathan and to thank him for coming, but both he and Hopper are gone. The painful pang returns until she joins her family at the car. She's the first to open the car door, and in the middle of the back seat is a single photo of her and Barb. It's from at a football game from last fall—they are looking at each other and laughing as the crowd cheers around them. She remembers the moment perfectly

—they were laughing at their shared appreciation for the rival quarterback’s backside. She knows it’s from Jonathan. She remembers seeing him at games, always at the edge of the crowd with his camera at the ready. He must have been taking photos for the yearbook. She hugs the photo to her chest and starts to cry despite the smile on her face.

“Everything okay, Nancy?” her mother asks.

“Look,” she says handing the photograph to her mother, “Jonathan left this for me.”

“What a great picture. How do you know it was Jonathan? I didn’t see him here today.”

“He was here with Chief Hopper. He must have dropped this by before leaving.”

“You’ll have to thank him for it. It was a very thoughtful,” her mother says, handing back the photo and squeezing her hand.

“Yeah, it was,” Nancy says, clutching the photo close to her chest once again.

Over the next few weeks, more photos start to show up. She finds them addressed to her in the mailbox, but a few wind up under on her car windshield after she’s leaving the library or under the door of her room. She’s sure Mike or the boys are helping Jonathan get them to her, but no one says a word. They almost always feature Nancy and Barb—various photos from school events early in the fall and the previous year—but a few feature Mike and the boys, lost in the excitement of a Dungeons & Dragons game, or one of Jonathan’s photos that she mentioned particularly liking. She considers reaching out to Jonathan to thank him for the photos (she hasn’t seen him again after the funeral), but she wants him to make the first move. While the photos are a move in and of themselves—and she loves them, loves how he knows which photos will mean the most to her—he still needs to show her that he wants this relationship. He can’t hide behind his camera forever and, for as much as much thought as

he's putting into these small gifts, he's still hiding from her.

One Saturday afternoon, she's in her room reading when she hears a knock on her door. "Come in," she calls, expecting it to be her mom or Mike. She sits up to greet them and is surprised to find Will smiling at her meekly.

"Is it OK if I come in," he asks, shyly.

"Yes, of course, please come in, Will," she says.

It's the first time she's been alone with Will since the night he got sick, and she can tell he's a bit nervous. She's forgotten just how much Will resembles Jonathan—the same shaggy brown hair, same delicate features and knowing eyes—and she's momentarily taken aback. But she gathers herself up quickly and gets up to give him a hug, which he quickly returns.

"It's so good to see you. I'm sorry I haven't gotten a chance to spend much time with you this summer," she says.

"Me, too," says Will. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. Keeping busy tutoring, studying for the SATs, that kind of thing. How about you? Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah, so much better. I'm still a bit sore from the surgery, but the other stuff—the coughing, the things—they're gone," he says looking away, almost as if embarrassed.

"Oh Will, I'm so relieved," she says, making sure to catch his eye.

"Um, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, anything," she says and pulls him over to the bed to take a seat.

"Did you break up with Jonathan because of me? Because of what happened?"

The question is like a blow to the chest. It takes a moment before she can answer. "No, Will, of course not. It had nothing to do with you."

“Are you sure? You two haven’t been together since that night, and I just wondered.”

“Will, Jonathan and I aren’t together because we’re still trying to figure out our relationship, not because of you. Everything that happened after you got sick just made things a bit more complicated that’s all.”

“Jonathan won’t talk to me about it, and I needed to know,” he says, quietly.

“I’m so sorry if we made you think that, Will, I truly am.”

“Thanks.”

“We still need to finish that game of Pitfall one of these days. I’ve got some ass kicking to resume,” she says, making him laugh.

As he gets up to leave, he turns to Nancy one last time. “He really misses you, you know.”

Nancy looks up at Will unsure how to respond.

“Jonathan is really good at taking care of me and my mom, but not very good at taking care of himself.”

“I think you’re right about that,” she says, amazed by how perceptive Will is. “Just between you and me, I really miss him, too.”

Will nods and smiles at her one last time before shutting her door, leaving Nancy as perplexed as ever.

By the time her birthday rolls around in July, she’s acquired quite a collection of Jonathan Byers photos. She’s taken to laying them out on her desktop so she can view them all together. Her desk is nearly covered, and she needs to figure out what she’s going to do if this continues for much longer. The story they tell is one of hope—even though Barb is gone, even though Eleven is still missing, the photos focus on moments of happiness or contemplation; the moments you soon forget when life overtakes you. When Jonathan told her that a

photo can capture so much more than words, she only half believed him—she figured he was just trying to impress her. But he was right. These images, especially when viewed together as a series, make her realize just how full her life has been—and continues to be. The only thing missing is the person behind the camera.

She hasn't mentioned her birthday to anyone, nor has anyone mentioned it to her. Even though she's not a melancholy as she was when school first let out, she's still not sleeping well and doesn't really feel up to celebrating. She goes about much of her day the same as normal—tutoring in the morning and taking Holly to the pool in the afternoon. She's just gotten out of the shower and is heading back to her room when she notices it—the house is eerily quiet. There's normally a natural din that her house takes on—the TV humming from the family room, her mother working in the kitchen, Holly's laugh. But she hears none of these sounds and starts to wonder what's going on.

She finishes getting dressed in her room, throwing on a sundress and some sandals, places her hair in her (now) standard ponytail, and heads downstairs to see what's going on. When she doesn't find anyone in the kitchen or family room, she gets suspicious. She heads to the basement but, once again, sees no sign of her family. She notices a random picnic table in the backyard and decides to check it out, using the basement door to head out back. Just as she steps outside, she's hit with a loud "Surprise!"

Nancy is greeted by her family and friends—Dustin, Lucas, and Will are there, as is Steve, Brenda (she knew they started dating), and Tiffany Springer, a new friend that she hasn't seen since school ended. Hopper and Joyce are also there, along with some family friends from the neighborhood. This was the last thing she expected, and she can't believe they all gathered for this.

"Happy Birthday, honey," her mom says coming to give her a hug. As Karen embraces her, she whispers in her ear, "I know you might not be up to this, but your father were determined. Just smile and play along as much as you can."

Nancy smiles at her mom's thoughtfulness and turns to the crowd plastering on an even bigger smile. "Thanks, everybody. I had no

idea!”

Nancy makes the rounds of the party, talking to numerous people she hasn't seen in months. At first, she has a hard time trying to make small talk, but she soon settles into a rhythm. An hour or so into the party, she's actually having a good time. Her parents really out did themselves—they've set up picnic tables, lawn chairs, and Tiki torches. Her favorite music is playing—or at least her favorite music before she became close to Jonathan—and her mom, as usual, has prepared a huge spread of food, including her favorite carrot cake with cream cheese frosting.

After the requisite singing of happy birthday and blowing out of candles—her wish is a simple one this year, but she doesn't really believe that it will come true—Nancy joins Steve and their high school friends, who are standing in a small group away from the mass of party goers.

“Happy Birthday, Nance,” Steve says, giving her a quick hug. “It's good to see you smile.”

“Yeah, it feels good to smile,” she says. “How's the summer going?”

“Oh, it's going. My dad insisted I get a job this summer, so I've been working at the club, cooking at the grill, renting golf carts, that sort of thing. I had these grand visions that it'd be like Caddy Shack, you know, some crazy characters to help the time fly. Boy, was I wrong,” he says laughing.

“I told him that he had delusions of grandeur, but he wouldn't listen to me,” Brenda says, speaking directly to Nancy for the first time.

“Yeah, he gets those sometimes,” Nancy says laughing.

“Hey, this is no fair, ladies. Just because I wanted my summer job to have some kicks doesn't mean I have delusions of grandness or whatever.”

They continue their bantering back and forth for a bit, catching up on all that's been going on. Tiffany pipes in now and again, relaying her adventures of working in the local ice cream shop over the summer.

They are interrupted briefly by Joyce Byers, who comes over to say hello to Nancy.

“Happy birthday, sweetie,” she leans in to give Nancy a hug.

“Thanks, Joyce. It’s good to see you,” Nancy responds.

“You, too. We’ve missed you around the house,” Joyce says sadly.

Nancy simply looks at Joyce and smiles, not quite sure what to say.

“I won’t keep you from your friends—and Hop’s getting eager to leave. He can only take parties for so long. Have a great night, Nancy,” she says turning to catch up with Hopper, who tips his hat to her from across the lawn.

“Nance, I don’t know how I feel about having the chief of police at your party,” Steve says as they watch Joyce and Hopper leave. “I feel like I need to be on my best behavior or something.”

“Yeah, it’s not something I ever expected either,” she responds.

“Why is he here?” Tiffany asks. “He doesn’t seem like someone your parents would hang out with.”

“Joyce is a family friend, and now that she and Hopper are dating, he’s around more. Plus he was really great to me through the whole Barb situation. He’s a good guy, really,” she responds.

“Now it all makes sense,” Brenda pipes in. “I’ve been seeing them together for a while, and I always thought it had to do with her son’s disappearance. But it’s been going on too long. They’re actually together, huh. That’s unexpected.”

“Why?” Nancy asks.

“I don’t know, Chief Hopper seems so normal, and Joyce Byers is a bit, well, odd. You know, a bit too quiet. Just think about Jonathan—I always figure like mother like son,” Brenda says. Both Nancy and Steve visibly bristle at the mention of Jonathan. Nancy hasn’t said anything to Steve about what happened between the two of them that last week of school, but she figures he must know that the

situation isn't good. "What'd I say?" Brenda says defensively in reaction to Nancy and Steve.

"Well, people are a lot more complicated than they appear," Nancy says, turning and walking over to the boys, who have been lighting sparklers on the lawn. "What I'd say?" she hears Brenda say again to Steve and Tiffany, but she ignores the rest of the conversation. Nancy has felt Jonathan's absence all night, particularly with Will and Joyce here, but she's trying her best to focus on those who did come to celebrate with her instead. So she grabs a sparkler out of Mike's hand and starts to chase Holly around the backyard, causing a ruckus among the kids.

After about a half-hour testing the limits of her parents' patience with sparklers and children, Nancy heads back over to her friends, who have now formed a small circle around a fire pit her parents pulled out for the party.

"I'm sorry, Nancy, for what I said. I didn't even think about you and Jonathan. I hope I didn't ruin the night," Brenda says genuinely.

"It's okay. I'm not even sure what's going on with me and Jonathan, so I can't expect others to understand. And you didn't ruin anything—it was time that I gave my brother a run for his money," she says smiling across the fire.

The conversation easily picks up where they left off with Steve regaling them with country club antics, and the others egging him on. Nancy sits back and lets herself truly enjoy the moment. It's the first time in a long while that she's spent time with friends her age, and she realizes just how much she misses these interactions. No one will replace Barb—or Jonathan for that matter—but she feels good, even happy right now. She looks over to her mom and catches her eye, giving her a big smile, which Karen immediately returns.

She doesn't know how long the four of them talk, but she figures it's been a while, as the party has started to wind down. Friends stop by their small circle to wish her a happy birthday one last time, and her parents yell that they are heading inside. Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will have gathered in their own circle at the edge of the yard and are quietly talking, although she can hear their laughs drift across the

darkened lawn now and again.

When Nancy leans in to adjust the fire, she notices a lull in the conversation. Looking up, she sees Jonathan standing about 10 feet away. His dark hair and pale complexion, paired with jeans and a black Bowie t-shirt, make him look almost otherworldly, and Nancy half expects him to disappear.

“Hey,” he says from across the lawn.

“Hey,” she says back to him, her throat suddenly very dry. She picks up her plastic cup and takes a drink, which gives her a moment to gather her thoughts.

He steps forward and hands her a small, wrapped package.

“Happy birthday, Nancy,” he says quietly.

She takes the package from his hand and stares at it for a second or two. When she finally looks up at him, she smiles. He offers her a crooked one of his own, and her stomach does a little flip in response. God, he still has such an effect on her, she thinks.

“Where’ve you been, Byers?” Steve asks, breaking the tension of the moment. Nancy wonders if he means tonight or the summer.

“Um, I had to work tonight at the movie theater and didn’t get off until a few minutes ago,” Jonathan says turning to Steve.

“Well, it’s about damn time you got here. Nance’s birthday is nearly over. Take a seat,” Steve says, as if it’s his party that Jonathan has just joined.

There’s only one seat available around the fire, and it’s right next to Nancy. He looks down at her raising his eyebrows in question, and she nods in response. Jonathan sits down, and she can smell the minty shampoo that he uses and another scent that’s just, well, Jonathan. It both comforts her and causes her pulse to quicken. She hasn’t been this close to him in more than a month, and her body is responding in ways that she wishes it wouldn’t. She’s sure that she’s blushing and hopes that the glow from the fire masks it from her friends.

"Your eye looks a lot better than the last time I saw you. How's it feel?" Steve asks again, keeping the conversation flowing.

"Yeah, it finally healed up a few weeks ago. Tommy has a mean punch," he responds.

"Don't be humble, Byers—you're the one who broke his nose." Steve laughs.

"That's right, you broke Tommy's nose, didn't you," Tiffany says, sitting up higher in her seat, excited by the shift in conversation. "I forgot about that. Is that why you were out of school for a while? Did you get in trouble?"

"No, no, I was out because Will got sick, and I needed to be with him," Jonathan says, looking down. "It was pretty bad."

"Was it related to what happened to him last year?" Brenda asks, perking up at the conversation as well. Man, this girl sure knows how to just go for the touchy subjects, Nancy thinks.

"No," Jonathan says, looking over nervously at Nancy. "It was an appendicitis, but it burst before they could do surgery. He was pretty sick, in the hospital for a while."

Nancy and Steve exchange a quick look. Raising his eyebrows at her, he makes a look that she infers can only mean "good cover," and the two quickly turn back to the conversation at hand.

"Wow, poor kid, he's been through a lot," Tiffany says, looking over at Will, who's in the middle of relating a story, his hands waving in the air and an excited look on his face.

"Yeah, he has," Jonathan says, looking at his brother, too. The look of tenderness that crosses his face moves Nancy to reach out to squeeze his hand before she can think twice. Jonathan jumps at her touch but doesn't pull away. "Sorry. I got a bit lost there," he says turning to her.

"It's okay," she says and pulls her hand away, giving him a quick smile.

“Well, he sure looks okay now,” Brenda adds.

“He is, but he tires out pretty quickly. I imagine he’ll slow down here pretty soon,” Jonathan says. As if on cue, Will sees his older brother from across the yard and comes running over. “Jonathan! Hey, Jonathan! Mom said I can stay the night, so I don’t need a ride home.”

“Sounds good, buddy.”

“Is that why you’re here? To pick up Will?” Nancy asks suddenly defensive.

“No,” Will jumps in before Jonathan can respond. “He was planning to come anyway—mom just thought he would stay longer than she and Hopper so he could give me a ride. But now he doesn’t need to,” Will says over his shoulder as he runs back to his friends.

“I never noticed how much he looks like you, Jonathan. It’s a little uncanny,” Tiffany chimes in.

“It’s the haircut,” Jonathan says dryly. “My mom always gave us bowl cuts as kids, and I guess they just stuck.”

“Thank god, my mom didn’t try to cut my hair. Imagine what would have become of these beautiful locks!” Steve says across the fire.

“Shut up, Harrington,” Jonathan fires back throwing a spare cup he found on the ground at Steve, which Steve easily bats away with his hand.

“No, it’s more than your hair,” Tiffany says laughing. “I don’t know, it’s your eyes and your smile. You look most alike when you smile.”

Jonathan smiles shyly in response, and it’s enough to break the ice, and the conversation continues easily. Nancy hasn’t seen Jonathan interact with this many people his own age, ever, and he looks like he’s having a good time. It’s pretty amazing to see. They discover that he and Tiffany’s older brother share the same taste in music, which, in turn, prompts Jonathan and Steve to debate about the merits (or lack of) of Journey. Jonathan looks over at her every now and again, and she can tell that he’s anxious about being here despite the affable

conversation.

“Are you going to open that,” Tiffany asks her pointing at the gift from Jonathan, which she’s laid beside her on the chair.

“Oh, yeah, I was just waiting for a good time,” Nancy says, hoping that she’ll have a chance to spend a few minutes alone with Jonathan.

“You can go ahead and open it,” Jonathan says.

“Are you sure?” She asks him, and he nods in response. She picks up the gift again and carefully opens the wrapping. She’s greeted with a white box, which she opens to find a simple black photo album. It looks expensive, like ones that professional photographers use, not something you find in your local department store. “For Nancy” is engraved in silver on the bottom right corner. She looks up at Jonathan, who is glancing anxiously at her and nervously biting his fingernails. She opens the album and finds the photo that she saw the afternoon in the darkroom, the one he took of her walking in the prairie behind his house, the sun shining in her hair. On the cover opposite, he’s written a short note: “To second chances—Jonathan.” The rest of the album is empty, but it’s the exact size for the photos he’s been sending her over the summer. It’s one of the most thoughtful gifts she’s ever received—he’s not only shared these memories with her, he’s given her a way to capture them, to hold them, and him, close.

“What is it?” Brenda asks.

“It’s a photo album,” Nancy responds quietly.

“Do you take a lot of photos, Nancy?”

“No, she doesn’t take photos, Brenda,” Steve jumps in annoyed. “Jonathan takes photos, you know that.”

“Oh, then why would Nancy need an album?”

“It’s perfect,” she says ignoring Brenda and looking up at Jonathan with tears in her eyes. “Thank you.”

Jonathan looks both relieved and genuinely happy. And then, suddenly, she sees it again, that look of passion that she loves. It's almost predatory, as if she's been caught in a trap and she can't look away. He leans forward, and she thinks he's about to kiss her, but, instead, he simply brushes a strand of hair that has come loose from her pony tail out of her face. She looks down at his lips for a moment, tempted to reach out and rub her finger along his bottom lip or worry it with her teeth. It's only when she sees his lips move into one of his crooked smiles that she finally looks up, blushing at her momentary fascination.

"Come on ladies, I'll give you both a ride home," Steve says breaking the tension, once again. "It's good seeing you, Jonathan."

"You, too, Steve," Jonathan says offering a small wave to the group.

"Let me walk you out," Nancy says, taking this opportunity to give herself a few minutes away from Jonathan to gather herself. Once she's said goodbye to everyone, she walks back over the fire. She's lets out a breath of relief, grateful that it's finally just her and Jonathan. He's moved over to sit on the edge of the picnic table closest to the house and away from the boys, his feet on the seat. He looks at the space next to him and back to her. "Wanna join me?" he asks.

"Sure," Nancy says and takes a sit beside him, close but not quite close enough for their legs and shoulders to touch. Between the fire and the hot July weather, she should be hot, but she's suddenly overcome with a chill that she knows has more to do with her nerves and her proximity to Jonathan.

"Thank you for the gift and the photos. And for coming tonight. It means a lot," she says breaking the silence.

"I'm sorry, Nancy. For everything. Fighting with Tommy, not talking to you, all of it. I'm sorry," Jonathan says in one big burst, as if he's been holding it in all night.

A profound relief washes over Nancy as she finally hears him acknowledge—and apologize for—all that's happened. She thinks about the best way to respond and decides that she may as well jump

right into the conversation she's been waiting to finish.

"Thank you, Jonathan. Really. But you still haven't told me what happened?"

She feels him sigh, and, after a minute or two, he finally says, "I was scared."

"Scared of what? We've fought a monster together, what can be scarier than that?"

"Losing you," he says quietly.

"Then why did you push me away?" she asks, turning to face him.

"Nancy, I'm not the guy who's supposed to get the girl. You know that, right?" She nods in response. "But somehow I got you. And just when things were going well, Tommy H. shows up and then Will gets sick. I meant it when I said I was tired, Nancy. Tired of fighting to defend the fact that I was good enough for you . . ."

"How many times do I have to tell you that's ridiculous . . ." she interrupts.

"Will you let me finish?" he says, clearly frustrated.

"I'm sorry. Keep going," she says.

"I know that I'm good enough for you, Nancy, but very few other people see it that way. I hated that every time we were seen together we were fighting rumors and whispers. I just wanted to be with you, no judgment or worries. Sure, I stood up to Tommy, but who was next? I didn't want that for us. Even if Will didn't get sick that night, I was already doubting that we would last."

"Jonathan," she tries to start again.

"Wait. I figured that if I cut things off that I'd be okay. At least it would be on my own terms. And then when I got home, you were waiting for me, and I realized how stupid that was. But then Hopper showed up, and I got so angry and acted like a total asshole. So I ran. While I was away, I kept thinking that Hop was right—I am like my

dad. I didn't want to subject you to that, no matter what. And then Will had the episode, and I just lost my mind for a while."

"Only love makes you that crazy and that stupid," Nancy says softly.

"What?" Jonathan asks.

"Flo, you know, Hopper's secretary, told me that when I went to get you ice for your cheek when you got arrested. She called you my boyfriend, which I denied, of course, but then she told me only love makes you that crazy and stupid. I think she was on to something."

"Yeah, sounds about right," Jonathan laughs.

"Why wouldn't you fight with me when I confronted you at school? You've fought with me a million times, why not then? Why wouldn't you talk to me? That's all I needed—for you not to ignore me."

Jonathan lets out a huge sigh. "I just shut down. It's an old habit, and one I'm not proud of. Look where it got us."

"No shit," is on the tip of Nancy's tongue, but she decides it's probably best not to say it. So they sit in a tense silence. Nancy notices how quiet it's gotten and realizes that the boys must have gone inside, leaving her and Jonathan alone for the first time in more than month. This is exactly what she's wanted since the morning Jonathan left her to see Will, but, now, she doesn't know what to do or where to take the conversation. So she focuses on the dying fire, watching the embers fade from red to orange and back again.

"You do know how I feel about you, Nancy," Jonathan finally says.

"No, I don't," Nancy says, her frustration getting the best of her. "A few photos after weeks of silence doesn't necessarily speak volumes, Jonathan." She winces at her sharp tone—she wasn't expecting her hurt to make itself so apparent in that moment—and Jonathan reels back as if he's been hit.

"I'm sorry," she says. "That came out a lot worse than I expected it to. I guess I'm still pretty upset."

"Really? I couldn't tell," Jonathan fires back.

“Oh, come on, Jonathan, how do you expect me to feel?” She retorts, her voice growing louder.

“I don’t know, Nancy. None of this makes sense to me,” his volume rising to match hers.

“Doesn’t make sense? It’s pretty damn clear from where I’m standing, Jonathan. You freaked out and left me alone. Alone. After everything we went through together, you shut me out when it got too hard.”

She’s standing now, hands curled into fists at her side, daring him to fight back.

“Well I’m sorry if my brother throwing up slugs and having to go to that lab freaked me out, Nancy,” he says, standing up to his full height. “And I’m sorry if being called a pervert and hearing even worse names about you made me feel like shit. Besides, I’ve spent most of my life alone, Nancy, it’s really not so bad. At least I didn’t have to deal with all the bullshit,” he says.

“Oh, so you’d rather be alone than be with me? What a cowardly thing to say.”

“Oh, so now I’m a coward, too. I get it. If I don’t react the way you expect me to, you write me off as a coward. Great. But I never said I didn’t want to be with you. You made that assumption yourself.”

“God dammit, Jonathan. What did you expect me to think? You wouldn’t talk to me. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Neither did I,” he explodes. “God, Nancy, do you think I know how this works? Any of it? The one thing I do know is that I fucked up, and I wish I could take it back, but I can’t.”

Karen Wheeler chooses this exact moment to insert herself into the situation. “Nancy, honey, is everything okay?” she calls from the back door.

“Yes, mom, everything is fine,” Nancy calls back.

“Well, if you need me, let me know.”

“Okay, mom,” Nancy says, wishing her mother would just disappear for the moment.

“Your mom still has impeccable timing,” Jonathan says, throwing himself into a lawn chair.

Nancy takes a seat across from him, the fire pit illuminating his pale complexion. This is what she’s wanted from him—the fight, the frustration. She can only begin to imagine the devastation and worry that defines his family life right now. He should be angry and confused, but she needs him to share that with her no matter how difficult it might be.

“Jonathan, if you would have just told me all this, I would have understood. I just want to understand,” Nancy says, all the fight disappearing from her body at once.

“My mom says the same thing to me all the time. I don’t know why I do this, Nancy, cut people out. Sometimes I think it’s easier to handle things on my own, not drag other people into my troubles. But I just ended up hurting you, which was the last thing I wanted to do,” he says tiredly.

“Why did you start sending me the photos?” she asks.

“When you came to our house with that giant casserole,” he looks up at her smiling when he mentions the casserole, then away again, “I knew I had to fix this. I didn’t realize how much I missed you until you were right in front of me. But I didn’t think I could just show up at your window one night or stop by to say hello. I found the photo of you and Barb earlier this spring, and I was waiting for a good time to give it to you. When I heard about the funeral, I figured that was my chance. And when Mike told me how much you liked it, I figured I had nothing to lose. Photos and mix tapes—those seem to work best for me.”

“God, I have fallen for the portentous, arty loner, haven’t I?”

“Yeah, I think so, complete with the fucked up family.”

“No one can say you don’t have it all, Jonathan Byers,” she says

jokingly, trying to catch his eye from across the fire.

He laughs and runs his hands through his hair, causing it to stand on end. He's never looked more vulnerable or more beautiful to her than at this moment.

"Do you love me, Jonathan?"

"You know how I feel. You've always known," he nearly whispers.

"But I need to hear it from you."

He stands up, walks over to her, and holds his hand out. She takes it, and he pulls her up. He cups her face with his hands and looks into her eyes as if searching for the answer to a long forgotten question. Nancy holds her breath and lets herself get lost in his auburn eyes. "I love you, Nancy Wheeler. I promise I won't shut you out again."

"I love you, too, Jonathan Byers," she says as she exhales the breath she's been holding. "Can you kiss me now?"

Jonathan smiles and kisses her forehead, followed by a kiss on each cheek. He then gently moves her pony tail to the side and kisses the curve of her neck, worrying the skin just enough that she knows he'll leave a mark. She closes her eyes and lets the sensation of his touch take over, moaning quietly. She can feel his lips move into a smile as they continue to make a trail up her neck and to her jaw. "Jonathan, please," she nearly begs.

It's only then that he moves to her lips. The kiss is soft at first, his lips meeting hers with a gentle pressure, but then he moves his hand to the back of her head and lifts it up slightly to give him full access to her mouth and causing her chest to press into his. He runs his tongue along her bottom lip, and she opens her mouth just enough to let his tongue collide with hers. Suddenly, the intensity changes, and he's kissing her with such abandon that she can barely breathe. But she can't bring herself to stop to catch her breath, now that she's got a taste of him again.

Nancy wraps her hands around his neck, pulling herself even closer into him. The chill that she felt earlier in the evening returns,

following Jonathan's movements as he runs his hands along her back and up her sides, stopping just below her chest. She can feel each swipe of his tongue, each press of his lips, down into her core, and her body is overcome with a delicious mix of hot and cold sensations everywhere their bodies meet. God, how she's missed this, she thinks, as she lifts herself onto her toes to create even more friction between them. Following her lead, Jonathan lifts her up by her thighs, wrapping her legs around his waist. She tightens her grip on him, creating as much pressure as she can between them. "Fuck, Nancy," he says, followed by a deep moan in the back of his throat that she feels down into her toes. She can't ever remember feeling desire this strong, and she doesn't want it to end.

Somehow Jonathan manages to walk them back toward one of the lounge chairs, while Nancy runs wet kisses along his neck and jaw, delighting in the feel of the rough stubble along her tongue. Each step he takes causes another jolt of desire to erupt in her, and when he finally lowers her down onto the chair and moves himself on top of her so that they are lying together, pelvis to pelvis, Nancy can barely contain a scream.

Jonathan brings his hands back up to her face again, running his thumbs along her cheekbones, and places his forehead on hers. "God, I've missed you," he says tenderly. "Me, too," she whispers.

"Nancy?" Jonathan asks.

"Hmm," she says, lost in the feel of running her fingers through his hair.

"I hate to say this, but if we don't stop now, I don't think I'm going to be able to stop." She can feel him shaking with the effort to keep himself still.

"Do you want to stop?" she asks quietly.

"That's complicated," he says, smiling. "Of course, I don't want to stop, but I also don't want to get caught with my pants down in your backyard by your mother. Or my brother."

"Good point," she says giggling, which only creates more friction

between them and they moan in unison.

“Will you stay with me?” Nancy asks.

“I’m not planning on going anywhere,” he says, leaning down for another kiss.

“Can we just sit out here and talk? There’s so much I want to ask you.”

He nods his head and he leans down and nibbles the side of her neck. “I’m going to get up now, okay?”

“Do you have to?” she mock pleads with him.

“Again, just think about the look on Will’s face if he catches us. Or Mike’s.”

“Oh god, will you move already,” she says laughing as she tries to maneuver her way out from under him.

He leans in and gives her a long, lingering kiss that ends with a solid nip to her bottom lip, making her squeal. “Man, I love that sound,” he says lifting himself fully off of her.

They take a moment to adjust themselves—Nancy straightens her pony tail and pulls her dress back into place, while Jonathan adjusts his jeans and tries to get his hair to lay flat. When they finally settle themselves, Nancy takes a good look at him. He has at least two hickies on the side of his neck, and his lips are pink and swollen. She’s sure she looks just as disheveled, if not more so.

Jonathan takes her hands and lifts her up out of the lounge chair. He then sits down himself and pulls her between his legs. She leans back into his chest, and he embraces her from behind.

“I don’t think I’ve slept for more than two hours straight since Will got sick,” Jonathan says after a few minutes.

“Me, either. My nightmares have been pretty bad, too. I even woke my mom up one night calling out for you.”

“I’m so sorry, Nancy,” he says, apologizing once again.

“It actually worked out okay. She and I ended up having a long talk. I, um,” she pauses, nervous about how he might take this, “I ended up telling her everything.”

“What do you mean by everything?”

“Well, everything about what happened last fall, about Barb and Will, about the Demogorgon and the Upside Down. And about my nightmares and you staying the night . . .”

“You mean she knows that I’ve slept here?” he asks sounding panicked.

“Yeah, she does, and it’s okay. Really. She was upset at first, but I think she finally understands us a bit more. And she appreciated someone finally telling her the truth. Really, don’t worry about her. She’ll be fine, I promise.”

“That was unexpected.”

“I know. A lot of what’s happened this year has been unexpected. Maybe it’s our new normal.”

“Maybe,” he says thoughtfully. “I heard you went monster hunting by yourself.”

“I did,” she said.

“Can you tell me about it?”

“Only after you tell me all about Will and what happened. He looks and seems great, Jonathan, but I know there’s more to the story.”

He lets out what can only be described as a bone weary sigh, and she knows this will be difficult for him. “Sure, Nance. Where do you want me to start?”

She takes his left hand in hers and gently runs her fingers over his matching scar, an old, comforting habit that she’s missed terribly. “Start after you left me at home that morning,” she says, and

Jonathan begins his tale.

11. Beyond the Upside Down

Notes for the Chapter:

So, I've finally made it to the end of this story. It's been a long time coming--far longer than I ever thought it would take. A couple of things to keep in mind before reading:

This was my first time writing a sex scene. I've read my fair share of smut, but never written it. I'm a bit terrified about making it public, but it's where their story took me, so I didn't want to leave it out. That said, I hope I've done an OK job. (Note that I'm more than likely blushing as I type this.)

I'm sure I let a few of the story lines go or wrap up too quickly, particularly regarding the Upside Down, and I'm sorry about that. The story for me was really about Jonathan and Nancy and how they could overcome what the world threw their way, so that's always where my focus returned.

I've truly appreciated the kudos and feedback I've received along the way. And I hope I'll be back with another story soon. I'm a bit tapped out of ideas right now, but I love these two characters so much--I don't think I can leave them for too long.

As always, enjoy reading!

Nancy has no idea what time it is—she imagines that it must be nearly dawn. Jonathan fell asleep about an hour ago, but she finds it impossible to join him. Her mind is still reeling from all that's happened. A surprise birthday party, unexpected friends, and, well, Jonathan. Leaning against his chest, she can feel him breathing peacefully, and it's a rhythm she's missed desperately. His warmth, the steady beat of his heart, her feet tangled up with his, and his arms resting gently on her stomach. She should be sleeping soundly, but she can't stop her thoughts from wandering back to all he shared

with her tonight.

Jonathan told her about his time with Will, explaining that he was afraid to leave him alone in the lab, afraid that they'd do some type of experiment. He or his mom were Will with at all times, except for surgery, and he still can't shake the feeling that something might still be wrong. On that very first day with Will, he wandered down a hall and was immediately stopped by an armed guard. He tried to explore more, but he was always prohibited from leaving his floor or going into certain hallways. From what he can tell, the majority of the lab was closed off. His mom told him that she's sure the door to the Upside Down must still be open, but she warned him not to explore any more—it was a place that was better left behind, she said.

Nancy could hear the fear in his voice when he told her about his experience, and she wished she could have been there to comfort him—or to explore with him. Like him, she can't help but shake the feeling that the Upside Down isn't through with them yet, but there's not much she can do about it tonight. She'd rather focus on the future instead—at least for as long as she can. And if the past few hours she's been with Jonathan are any indication, they have a lot of lost time to make up for.

Now that the fire has gone out, the evening chill has set in, and, even though she's surrounded by Jonathan's warmth, her sundress does little to stop the chill from taking hold. Plus, her bed sounds far more comfortable to her than spending another hour on this lawn chair, no matter how far it reclines. She reaches up with her arm and gently turns Jonathan's head to face hers. She places a soft kiss on his lips and whispers, "Jonathan, wake up."

He doesn't move, so she tries again, this time adding a bit more force behind her kiss. "Jonathan, let's go inside," she whispers again.

He starts to stir, but instead of opening his eyes, he moves in for another kiss and gently maneuvers her so that her chest is pressed against his, never once allowing their lips to part. He runs his hands up her back and to her head, undoing her pony tail and gently straightening her locks. When she tries to speak again, he pulls her in more closely, moving his lips to her neck.

“Jonathan, let’s go inside,” she says breathlessly.

“Hmm,” he hums as he continues his ministrations.

“I’m cold,” she pleads.

“I can warm you up,” he says, ducking as Nancy swats his head in frustration.

“I’m serious,” she whines.

“So am I,” he says, pulling her in for another kiss. She should have expected this response from him. Jonathan is always especially affectionate in the moments when he first wakes, as if he’s still lost in his dreams, the weight of the world yet to settle on his shoulders. She lets herself enjoy the moment, the push and pull of his kisses, the small sighs and moans he makes when he gives in to his instincts, and the warmth that radiates from her core to the tips of her fingers and toes. The sound of the backdoor opening startles them out of their embrace.

“Nancy? Is that you?”

“Mike? What are you doing out here,” Nancy whispers to her brother.

“I thought I heard something moving outside, and I wanted to make sure it was you,” he calls back, walking over to her and Jonathan. “Oh, hi, Jonathan. I couldn’t see you in the dark.”

“Hi, Mike,” Jonathan responds tersely. Nancy can tell he’s trying hard to keep his annoyance at bay, and she can’t blame him. He predicted this might happen.

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone. Good night,” Mike says turning and walking back into the house.

“Good night,” she says back to him.

“I told you that would happen,” Jonathan says.

“Well, you were the one who instigated the make out session. I was just trying to wake you up so I could sleep in my far more

comfortable bed,” Nancy says, pushing him back onto the chair.

She stands up and reaches her hand out to him. He takes it and pulls himself up. “Let’s go inside,” Nancy says, leading him to the back door.

Once inside, they are greeted by the sounds and smells of four preteen boys lost in slumber. Nancy gingerly walks around the mass of sleeping bags and outstretched arms and legs on the floor, pulling Jonathan along with her. She stops when he lets go of her hand. Turning back to him, she whispers, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m going to stay down here tonight,” he whispers back.

“Why? You don’t have to.”

“I don’t want to mess this up by being caught in your room tomorrow morning. I’ll grab the couch,” he says.

Nancy has to admit that he has a point. “Fine,” she sighs.

He picks up her left hand and gently kisses her scar. “Goodnight, Nancy.”

“Goodnight, Jonathan,” she says and turns to tiptoe up the stairs. Half-way to the top, she looks back down and sees that Jonathan has settled himself on the couch, directly above Will, who is sleeping soundly on the floor. She sees Jonathan lean down and ruffle Will’s hair before covering himself with an old afghan. Her heart stops for a moment in response. Why does she have such a weakness for the Byers brothers? She’s still pondering the question as she drifts off to sleep.

Nancy wakes up the next morning to the smell of bacon and coffee, along with the din of activity coming from the kitchen. It takes her a minute to get her bearings, as she’s still groggy from a lack of sleep, but once she remembers that Jonathan is more than likely in the middle of the din, she throws on a t-shirt and pair of shorts and runs downstairs.

She’s greeted by her mother, who is frying bacon on an electric

griddle on the kitchen island. “Good morning, sweetie,” she says with a particularly cheerful grin. “Look who’s helping me make breakfast,” she says as she turns and reveals Jonathan flipping pancakes at the stove. He looks over to her, shrugs his shoulders, and offers her one of her favorite crooked smiles before turning back to the stove.

“I didn’t expect to find Jonathan downstairs with the boys this morning,” Karen continues, “but when Will told me he makes the best pancakes, I had to put him to work.”

“Jonathan, you really don’t have to make us all breakfast, you know,” Nancy says.

“I like to cook,” he says shrugging his shoulders “And you haven’t had any of my pancakes yet,” he adds, smiling. When she looks back over to her mother, Karen winks at her.

Nancy grabs a plate from the corner of the kitchen island, loads up on bacon and pancakes, gives Jonathan a kiss on the cheek (causing him to turn a nice shade of crimson), and heads to the table. She’s greeted by shouts of good morning and Dustin and Lucas making kissy, kissy faces at her, which she promptly shuts down by throwing one of her pancakes at their heads. She takes a seat and enjoys the ensuing chaos of the morning. Jonathan joins her shortly with a fresh stack of pancakes and a plate for himself.

“So?” he asks her as he takes a seat.

“So, what?” she asks coyly.

“Oh, so this is how you’re going to play this, Wheeler. Two can play this game, you know.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Byers,” she says, emphasizing his last name.

“We’ll see,” Jonathan banters back as he grabs her thigh from under the table, causing Nancy to squeal and spill her orange juice. The entire table stops what they are doing to stare at the two teenagers. Jonathan simply eats his breakfast as if nothing has happened, and Nancy says “what” in a way that makes her sound as if she was

Mike's younger sibling. "God, he's going to pay for this," she thinks to herself.

Jonathan doesn't say a word, just eats and watches the scene as well. And, as much as she hates to give him the satisfaction, she has to finally admit out loud that his pancakes are pretty damn good.

"I thought you'd like them," he says, smiling shyly, as if this hasn't been his plan all along.

Nancy kicks his leg gently under the table, and he catches her foot with his own before she can move away. Their legs stay entwined throughout the rest of breakfast.

Ted Wheeler makes his way downstairs about 20 minutes later, prompting the boys to run back down into the basement, and her mother finally takes a seat with Holly. Nancy can feel Jonathan stiffen at the presence of her father, bringing his hand up to cover one of the hickeys on his neck. He soon relaxes when Ted (who pays little attention to anything except for the food on his plate) compliments him on the pancakes. Her parents ask Jonathan all of things that parents ask—what are you doing over the summer? How's your mom doing? What are your plans for college?—and she and Jonathan finally make their escape during a lull in the conversation.

Nancy leads Jonathan up to her room, but doesn't shut the door. She figures that she should at least try to get into the good graces of her mother. The open door doesn't stop Jonathan from capturing her in a deep kiss the minute they are inside her room, and Nancy pulls him down onto the bed with her.

"God, I've wanted to do that all morning," he says rolling over and staring at the ceiling.

"Me, too," she responds breathlessly. "What are your plans today?" She revels for a moment in the fact that she can ask him about his plans once again.

"I've got to work at noon, but I'll be off by 7."

"So, want to get together tonight?"

“Yeah. Come by after work?”

“Perfect. So how was my mom this morning?”

“Well, I got a nice lecture about staying the night without her permission. She wasn’t really mad, just forceful. I guess she hasn’t said anything to your dad about it, but she did tell me that if I stay in the future, there are some ground rules.”

“Ground rules?” Nancy asks, hesitantly.

“Yeah. We can’t lock the door, and she expects us to sleep and nothing more,” he explains.

“Are you kidding me? She actually talked to you about that?” Nancy groans.

“It was one of most awkward conversation’s I’ve ever had, and I’ve had a lot of awkward conversations,” he replies.

“What did you say?”

“I just nodded my head—I was too embarrassed to say anything,” he says rubbing his hands over his face as if trying to erase the conversation from his memory.

“I’m sorry, Jonathan,” she says scooting closer to him and wrapping her arm around his waist.

“It’s okay—much better than getting caught in your bedroom by your parents. Or Hopper for that matter. And I think she really likes my pancakes,” he adds erupting into laughter.

“Did you seriously just make an inappropriate innuendo about my mother?” Nancy asks, pushing him away.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” he says, laughing even more.

“Jonathan Byers, I have no idea what happened to you over the last month or so, but I think you may have lost your mind.”

“I told you that I did,” he says, finally calming down. They sit silently

for a few minutes, lost in their thoughts. “Nancy?”

“Hmmm?”

Jonathan turns over on his side, and she follows his lead, so that they are facing each other. “I didn’t come over last night expecting this to happen. I wanted to give you the photo album and wish you a happy birthday. I didn’t expect anything more from you.”

“Did you not want this to happen, us to be together again?” Nancy asks suddenly concerned.

“No, god no. I just want you to know that I didn’t have grand plans of winning you back or was trying to take advantage of your birthday to make a move. I, um, just wanted you to know that I cared . . . I’m not making any sense,” he says exasperated.

“I didn’t expect this to happen again so quickly either. But I’m glad it did,” she says, taking his hand in hers and bringing it to her chest. “Last night, I spent most of the evening trying to distract myself so I wouldn’t focus on the fact that you weren’t at the party. And then you were. I don’t know what it is between us, Jonathan, but I need you,” she adds quietly.

“I need you, too,” Jonathan says in return. They stare at each other for a long moment, and Nancy can barely breathe. The tension in the room is palpable, and she wishes that they were alone, truly alone, for once.

“Nancy, Jonathan, are you there?” her mother calls from below, breaking the spell. Nancy pulls herself off of the bed, huffing in frustration, and goes to the doorway, calling down, “Yes, we’re just talking.”

“Joyce called and wants Will to be home soon,” Karen responds.

“Okay,” Nancy replies and turns back to Jonathan, who has gotten up and moved over to her desk. He is running his fingers along the series of photos she’s arranged on the desktop. “I’ve never seen them all together like this,” he says. “Everyone looks so happy.”

“I know,” Nancy says joining him. “I’ve been so focused on all that’s

happened, all that's changed, that I forgot that there's still some happiness in all of this." She reaches up and turns his head so that he's looking at her. "That's why I love them so much, Jonathan. They make me remember the good."

He smiles down at her. "Can I help you put them into the album? Maybe later tonight?"

"I'd love that," she says and leans up to give him a light kiss. "Now, come one, you've got to get Will home."

Nancy's desire to have a relatively normal summer is finally realized. Since getting back together, she and Jonathan hang out at their houses talking (among other things), listening to music, or watching movies until the early morning hours. They play Atari with their brothers, babysit her sister, and, sometimes, even join in a D & D adventure. She joins him in the darkroom to develop photos, and he helps her study for the SAT. They even hang out with Steve every now and then. In the absence of the constant rumors and stares of Hawkins High, Nancy sees a new side of Jonathan emerge. One where he's more relaxed, more comfortable in his own skin, more confident. She imagines this side has always existed, and she feels lucky that he shares it with her now.

There are still moments when the Upside Down returns. Will's coughing—and the slugs—have disappeared, but he still seems to slip away from time to time, staring into the distance, skin paper white. She can see and feel Jonathan stiffen at these moments, his eyebrows knitting together with worry. But, once it passes, Will insists that he's okay; they both know he's not. Hopper avoids Jonathan's questions about the lab, tells him not to worry about what he saw. They agree that Dustin's on to something when he refers to him as Landau. And Joyce tries to get them to believe that everything is back to normal, yet they both know that normal doesn't exist for them anymore. They find comfort in each other instead, in their connection to that other world and their growing connection to each other.

Yet they are never truly alone. Perhaps she was too honest with her mother, who always seems to be lurking just at the bottom of the

stairs or prowling the upstairs hall at night. And with Hopper's comings and goings at all hours of the day and night, Jonathan's house doesn't lend them much privacy. They even tried to escape in Jonathan's car one night but got caught by Officer Callahan, who thought they had car trouble. Between their work schedules, family obligations, and the quickly approaching school year, Nancy is afraid that they will never get to spend any time with just each other, and she is growing more and more frustrated as the summer days pass.

After a week of late night shifts at the movie theatre for Jonathan (trying to earn some extra cash for college applications) and a babysitting job spent chasing three children under the age of five for her (a favor for a neighbor), Nancy's patience is particularly thin. All Nancy wants to do on this Friday night is zone out in front of the television and find something to occupy her mind while she waits for Jonathan to get off work. But thanks to her brother claiming the television to watch the latest *Jaws*, she's left with nothing to do but mope in her room while she waits for Jonathan to call. She's irritable and can't seem to settle down, not even reading her favorite Jane Austen book helps. She flips herself over onto her stomach in frustration and notices a package on her windowsill. She walks over to the window and picks up a small white envelope with her name written in Jonathan's hand on the front. She looks out the window, fully expecting to see him waiting for her on the roof or at least his car in the cul-de-sac, but there is no sign of him. She takes the envelope back over to her bed and turns it over once or twice in her hands, wondering when he had time to leave this for her.

She opens it slowly and removes a series of Polaroid photos—she has no idea he even owned a Polaroid. The first is a photo of the back of his car on dirt road. The second shows their favorite view of the Hawkins Lake. The third is a blanket spread on the ground. And the fourth shows the alarm clock next to Jonathan's bed, its face reading 8:30. The final photo features a piece of notebook paper with a single question mark on it, below, in the white space under the photo is Jonathan's signature.

Nancy lays the photos out in the order they were in the envelope, and the message he's sent her becomes clear. She looks at the clock, which says 8:15, and she immediately grabs her purse and runs

downstairs.

“Mom, I need the car,” she yells as she runs scrambles to find her mother’s purse.

“What’s going on?” Karen asks as she walks in from the family room.

“Where’s your purse? I need to take the car,” Nancy says. “I forgot that I promised Jonathan that I would watch Will for him tonight—he had to take an extra shift—and I’m late.”

“Hold on, they’re in here,” Karen replies, grabbing her purse from the hall closet and handing they keys to Nancy.

“Thanks, Mom. Don’t wait up for me—Jonathan won’t get home until after midnight,” she says as she runs out the door and into the family station wagon. She feels a moment of guilt for lying to her mother once again, but it quickly passes once she’s in the car and on her way to the Hawkins Lake and Jonathan.

When she arrives at the lake, she sees Jonathan’s car parked in the usual spot, and he’s sitting on the hood waiting for her. She pulls in beside him and hops out of the car as fast as she can. He slides down off of the hood and walks over to her slowly, his lips curled up at the side as he watches her.

“Hey,” she says breathlessly.

“Hey, yourself,” he replies. “I’m glad you made it.”

“Thanks for the invite.”

Jonathan reaches out to take her hand, and he walks her around the car and over to the grassy banks of the lake, where the blanket featured in the photo is spread out on the grass, along with a couple of extra blankets and two bottles of Miller High Life.

“The High Life?” she asks him.

“Well, it was the best I could do at the moment. It is the champagne

of beers, you know,” he says lightly.

“That’s right,” Nancy says laughing, “What was I thinking?”

He walks them over the blanket, pulls her down to sit beside him. Nancy takes off her shoes, and Jonathan follows her lead. Jonathan takes the moment to open both bottles of beer and hands her one, holding his up to toast. “To a night just for us,” he says. “To second chances,” Nancy follows, and he grins in response. They touch their bottles together and take a drink.

“God, that’s awful,” Nancy says.

“I don’t think it’s too bad,” he says looking it over. “At least it’s not Hopper’s signature Stag.”

“You’re right, thank you for not bringing that,” she says, leaning in to bump his shoulder. “And thank you for this,” she adds quietly. “I love it.”

“You’re welcome,” he responds.

“How long have you been planning this?”

“Just a couple of days. Trevor asked me to switch shifts with him, and suddenly the tonight opened up. I figured it was time we had something resembling a real date.”

“You couldn’t just come pick me up and bring me flowers?” she asks, knowing full well that Jonathan doesn’t really do the traditional dating thing.

“Are you kidding? Monster hunter Nancy Wheeler being courted with flowers? I figured I at least had to give you some type of mystery to solve, add a layer of suspense.”

“You know me too well, Jonathan Byers,” she says, taking the opportunity to scoot closer to him on the blanket. They sit in silence for a minute or two, watching the sun set over the lake and the fireflies take flight. She knows him pretty well, too, and she can tell that something’s off tonight. Aside from holding her hand, he hasn’t touched her yet. Normally, the minute they are out of the sightlines

of their friends or family, he's pulling her close.

"Jonathan, why the beer?" she finally asks.

"What do you mean?" he asks in return.

"Well, aside from our one evening of pot, you and I aren't big partiers, or at least not drinkers. Why tonight?"

"I don't know, it just sounded good—drinking beers under the stars by the lake."

"I get it, but is that all?" she asks softly. He lets out a sigh in return but doesn't answer. She knows she's hit a nerve but doesn't want to force him to open up. She also doesn't want to waste any of this time together, so she takes their beers and sets them on the grass. She then sits on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. He pulls her close, settling his hands on her waist and gently stroking the base of her spine, sending chills up and down her back and arms. She leans in and kisses his neck and whispers, "Please talk to me."

Jonathan pulls back and takes her face in his hands, looking into her eyes for a moment before leaning in for an all-encompassing kiss that takes her breath away. He breaks their connection with a nip to her lower lip but keeps their foreheads locked together. Taking a deep breath, he finally says, "I'm, ah, a bit nervous about tonight, and I thought the beer might help."

"Nervous? Why? It's just me, Jonathan, just us," Nancy responds.

"I know, but I want to . . ." he trails off before finding his courage, "I want to be with you, and it's my first time, and I know it's not yours, and I just needed . . . something." After he finishes, he drops her gaze, clearly embarrassed by his admission.

"Jonathan, look at me," she says trying to catch his eye. "Look at me," she says again, and he finally does. There's more than nervousness in his eyes; the vulnerability she finds looking back at her breaks her heart. "I'm nervous, too" she admits. "It might not be my first time having sex, but it'll still be my first time with you. Nothing that happened before matters now. I want to be with you,

Jonathan, more than anything,” she finishes.

Jonathan’s eyes haven’t left hers, and she can both see and feel his confidence growing. The vulnerability has been replaced with an intensity that once again makes her feel as if she’s caught in his snare, her body trapped in the intensity of his gaze. “I love you, Nancy,” he says softly.

“I love you, to—,” she starts to say in return, but Jonathan flips her over onto her back before she can finish. He settles himself between her legs and has both of his arms resting on either side of her head. He leans down and kisses her, parting her lips just enough to tease her with his tongue. “I need you to do me a favor, Nancy,” he finally says. She nods her head. “I need you to relax and just follow my lead, okay?” She nods again. Jonathan smiles and immediately begins to trail kisses down her neck and chest, taking a moment to lift her shirt over her head. She isn’t wearing a bra, and the look on Jonathan’s face when he sees her bare chest in the moonlight is worth the lies she told to get here.

He proceeds to work his way down her chest and stomach, kissing and caressing her along the way, and Nancy does what he asks—she lets herself get lost in the moment, focusing only on the touch and feel of Jonathan’s lips and hands as they explore her body. She’s so lost in the delicious tingling sensation she feels each time Jonathan brushes her chest with his fingers or tongue that it takes her a moment to realize that he’s made his way to her thighs, his hands lingering at the top of the waistband of her skirt.

“Nancy?”

She looks down at him, eyes growing wider when what he’s about to do finally dawns on her. “Is this okay?” he asks.

Nancy takes a moment to think about her current situation. While she had been intimate with Steve, they had never done anything like this. He had never even tried. While thought of Jonathan exploring her most private parts honestly embarrasses her, it also sparks a flame at her core that grows each time she feels Jonathan’s steady breathing between her legs.

"It's okay, Nancy, I don't have to," he says as he begins to move, but Nancy tightens her thighs around his body, stopping him from moving.

"No, Jonathan. I want you to," she finally responds.

"Really?"

"Really."

She relaxes her thighs, and Jonathan slowly pulls her skirt and underwear down her legs, placing gentle kisses on her thighs and calves along the way. He then moves back up to her inner thighs, and she can feel his breath at her core, causing her to tremble in anticipation and a yearning ache to begin deep inside her. She's never felt more exposed than she does at this moment, but it doesn't embarrass her—it excites her. She can feel herself growing more aroused as she waits for Jonathan to make his next move.

Jonathan places a gentle kiss on her pubic bone, just above her core, before he parts her folds with his fingers. When his tongue makes contact with her center, she's amazed by the feeling—it's electric and wet and impossibly soft and insistent all at once—and she moans in response. Motivated by her reaction, Jonathan continues to explore her, and she forgets everything except for the feeling of his tongue and fingers and the growing pressure she feels building in her abdomen. When he pushes his finger into her, curling it at the tip, she nearly loses her mind.

"Oh my god, Jonathan," she keens, legs shaking and stomach trembling. Afraid she's about to fly into a million pieces, she's grabs handfuls of the blanket to ground herself to something. When Jonathan adds a second finger, she's nearly unhinged by the sensation that overtakes her body. She's making sounds—panting and moaning and cursing—that she never expected herself to make. But she's never felt anything like this, and she wishes for the mounting pressure deep in her belly to be released and to never stop at the same time. She finally lifts her neck and looks down at Jonathan, who is looking directly up at her, his pupils blown and eyes so dark they almost scare her. "Jonathan, please," she begs, although she doesn't really know what she's asking for.

He pauses for a moment and lifts up so that she can see his full face, slick with her arousal. And then he gives her that crooked smile, the one reserved only for her, and returns to his ministrations, even more intensely than before. It only takes a few more minutes for her wish to be granted—her pleasure crests bringing with it a deep moan, followed by wave after wave of aftershocks that leave her completely wrecked, shivering in their wake. When she recovers enough to open her eyes, Jonathan has moved to lie beside her. He's resting on his side, head propped up on his hand, and is looking at her in awe. She rolls onto her side and leans in to give him a long, sloppy kiss.

"You are so beautiful when you come, Nancy," he whispers.

Ten minutes ago, Nancy would have been mortified by this statement, but now, it turns her on even more. "Jonathan, where did you learn to do that?" she asks dreamily.

"Lots of practice," he says, shocking Nancy out of her reverie.

"Are you serious?" she asks, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice. But then she notices the smile that Jonathan is trying hard to keep at bay, and she swats his head. "That's cruel, Jonathan."

He starts to laugh and pulls her into him. "I'm sorry. You still seemed out of it, and I wanted to see if you were paying attention." Looking her squarely in the eyes, he follows, more seriously, "I've never done that before, but I've thought about it for months."

"Really?"

He nods in return.

"And how was it for you?" she asks, feeling bold.

"It was amazing," he says, followed by another sloppy kiss. She can feel how aroused he is through his pants, and she realizes that he's still fully clothed.

"Okay, Jonathan Byers, your turn."

She rolls him onto his back, climbs on top of him, and starts to pull off his t-shirt. Jonathan helps her take off his shirt and starts to

unbutton his pants, but she stops him. “No, I want to do this,” she says, palming him through his jeans. Jonathan drops his head to the blanket and places his hands over his face, trying to keep himself under control. Nancy slowly unzips his jeans and pulls them down his legs. She returns to his waist and curls her fingers under the waistband of his white boxers and follows the same journey she just made with his jeans, making sure her finger nails leave light trails down his thighs and over his knees. When she returns to his waist a second time, she takes a moment to admire him. Jonathan is truly beautiful—he’s not tall, but he’s long and lanky in every place that counts, and his pale skin gleams in the moonlight. She settles herself between his legs and takes his hardness in her hand, gently squeezing as she moves her hand from the base to the tip. He moans but doesn’t move.

“Jonathan,” Nancy says, sounding far more seductive than she ever thought she could be.

He props himself up on his arms and looks down at her, his hazel eyes once again black with desire. Nancy keeps her eyes locked with Jonathan’s and slowly takes him into her mouth. She runs her tongue along his shaft before bobbing her head slowly. “Fuck, Nancy,” Jonathan moans, before dropping his head back down to the blanket. She takes him fully into her mouth twice more, meeting her mouth with her hands at his base, before he gently touches her head.

“Nancy, I’m never going to last if you keep going,” Jonathan says softly.

She slowly sits up and smiles at him. She knows what he wants, and she wants it, too. She pushes him back down and moves up to settle herself on top of him so that they can each feel their arousal, her softness meeting his hardness. It’s the first time they have been completely naked together like this, and she revels in the feel of his taut muscles against her skin. Jonathan closes his eyes tightly, and she leans down and kisses firmly on the lips. “Do you have a condom?” she whispers. He nods his head and replies, “In the back pocket of my jeans.” Nancy turns herself around and reaches for his jeans, grabbing the small square packet. She turns back to Jonathan and no longer sees lust in his eyes, but love, and the realization of what they are about to do hits her. She stops momentarily, frozen in

the moment. This is what she's wanted for so long, but, now, it's about to happen, and it's almost unreal. He takes the condom from her hands, opens it, and places it on himself. "Nancy," he says softly. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes," she says quickly shaking her head. "I'm just, just a bit overwhelmed."

"Me, too," he says and pulls her back down to kiss her once again. He runs his hands up and down her torso, stopping to run his fingers along the underside of her breasts, and the pressure begins to build again in the pit of her stomach. Nancy takes the opportunity to take control of the situation. She lifts herself then and places him at her core and slowly lowers herself down. She's overwhelmed by the feeling—she was ready for him, but it's been a while since she's had sex, and Jonathan is, well, different than Steve. It isn't painful, but it's not quite comfortable yet either. "Nancy," she hears Jonathan say shakily. "Are you okay?"

She didn't realize she had closed her eyes, and everything she's feeling must be reflected on her face. She takes a moment before looking down at Jonathan—she can tell that he's struggling to stay still, but his concern has clearly taken a forefront to whatever else he's feeling. She nods her head at him. "I just need a minute. Is that okay?" she asks. He nods and then closes his eyes.

Nancy leans forward and rests her hands on either side of his head, letting her hair fall to create a canopy over their faces. She leans in to kiss him, opening his mouth with her tongue. She wants somehow to convey to him all that she's feeling—overwhelmed, excited, aroused, loved. He responds eagerly, bringing his hands up to the back of her neck and pulling her even closer to him. She's so focused on the kiss, she doesn't realize that she has started moving, rocking back and forth, until Jonathan breaks the kiss and looks up at her, amazed. He moves his hands down to her waist and guides her slowly, helping her to set the pace. Suddenly, everything changes. Jonathan fills her completely. Every movement brings a new sensation, and her rocking motions create a delicious friction that she never wants to stop chasing. The moans and keens she made earlier erupt from her again—she can't stop them no matter how hard she tries—and Jonathan soon joins her. She opens her eyes to watch him—she's never seen

him look so relaxed, so open, and the love she feels for him in that moment overwhelms her. She starts to chant his name to the rhythm they set, and he looks up at her then. He smiles, a beautiful, full smile and reaches up to run his fingers along her mouth, letting her suck gently on his thumb. She closes her eyes and gets lost, once again, in the moment.

The next thing she realizes she's on her back, with Jonathan rocking above her. He somehow maneuvered them without breaking their contact, and he's now taken full control. His head is down, forehead resting on her shoulder, and his hand is palming her chest, pinching at her nipple. Every pinch sends a shock straight to her core. Jonathan's pace begins to quicken, and that pressure that she loves starts to build once again. She hears Jonathan, in turn, start to chant her name—Nancy, Nancy, Nancy—and she knows he's close.

“Let go, Jonathan,” she whispers into his ear. He looks up at her then and brings his forehead to hers, kissing her between thrusts. She wraps her legs around his waist, bringing him even deeper into her, and that's all it takes for him to peak, a deep moan erupting from him just as he stills, his thrusts becoming more erratic. Nancy soon follows, waves of pleasure washing over her once again. She's come before during sex, but never like this.

When she comes down from her high, Jonathan still has his forehead on hers a huge smile on his face.

“Oh my god, Jonathan,” is all she can say to him.

“I know,” he responds, breathing heavily. “Is it always like this?”

“No. At least it hasn't been for me. This is all you, us,” she says. He blushes at that and slowly releases himself from her. He removes the used condom, turns her on her side, and wraps himself around her, enveloping her in his embrace. “I love you,” he whispers into her ear.

“I love you, too,” she says quietly.

They take their time getting dressed, rising slowly and helping each

other with their clothes. Nancy catches herself stopping and looking at Jonathan from time to time as he dresses, still taken aback by what just happened. It was never like this with Steve—always more rushed, urgent. They never made time to explore each other like she and Jonathan just did. The only word she can use to describe the difference is intimate. They had sex, but they were never truly intimate. She's shouldn't be surprised by the intensity of what she just experienced with Jonathan, but it takes her breath away all the same.

She catches him looking at her too, and they smile—goofy, toothful smiles—and she's more at ease than she has been in months. When she's fully dressed again, she sits down next to him and runs her fingers through his hair as he finishes lacing up his boots.

“Do you need to be home soon?” she asks.

“No, mom and Hopper had planned to stay home with Will tonight since I had to work. They aren't expecting me until midnight at the earliest,” he says, finishing up with his shoes. “You?”

“I told mom not to wait up. I kinda told her that I was heading over to babysit for Will while you worked. Let's hope she and your mom don't chat about tonight.”

Jonathan looks back at her, smiling. “You've always been good with a quick response—babysitting, monster hunting—I wish I could think that quickly on my feet.”

“Well, it can get me into trouble from time to time,” she says lying back on the blanket. Jonathan joins her, and they lie side by side looking up at the sky. “When can we do this again?”

“If you give me another 10 minutes or so . . .” Jonathan says before Nancy elbows him in the ribs.

“You know what I mean,” she whines.

“I know, I know,” he says. “I'd stay here all night if we could, Nancy,” he adds softly.

“If only we could,” she trails off, thinking about all of their

obligations, the approaching school year. Jonathan must understand the direction her thoughts have taken, and he reaches over and turns her face to look at him. "I promise that we won't go another week without being alone together, even if I have to sneak into your room at the crack of dawn," he says.

She smiles, grateful for his understanding, and lays her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat, slow and steady. "I'm sorry, Nancy, that I wasted so much time," he says quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"I shouldn't have shut you out before. All of the time we could have been together . . ." he says. "How could I fight a real life monster and be scared of my feelings for you? It doesn't make sense, and I'm sorry."

"It's okay. It's in the past, and we can't waste time focusing on what's done," she says, looking up at him. "Who knows when the world will turn upside down again, so let's focus on what's next, okay?"

He doesn't look at her but nods his head in response. "So, I got applications to Columbia and Barnard College this week," she says after a few minutes pass.

"What?" Jonathan asks, shocked.

"You heard me," she adds, smiling to herself.

"Those are in New York," he adds.

"Yeah, I know. I might not want to go to NYU, Jonathan, but that doesn't mean that I don't want to be near you next year."

Jonathan is silent for a moment, but he tightens his hold on her. "I never thought . . ."

"I know, but I did," she adds. "How can we hunt monsters together if we're hundreds of miles apart?"

"Good point," Jonathan says, leaning down to kiss her head. "You're always a step ahead of me, Nancy."

She laughs before responding. “Oh, I don’t know. I think I just know what I want.”

She doesn’t look up at him, but she can feel Jonathan smile, and, for the first time since last fall, the future doesn’t seem so frightening to her at all.

Author's Note:

Well, I couldn't stay away for long! This is a bit of a continuation of my first story, All of You, so if you want a bit more context, you may want to check it out. Jonathan and Nancy are always my endgame, but I also wanted to explore what would happen if they were confronted with a the reality of life in Hawkins (both human and supernatural). We'll see how it goes!

As always, your thoughts and comments are welcome. And enjoy!